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**EXPECTATION, INTERACTION AND TRANSITION:
A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY CAREERS FAIRS**

STEPHEN BOYD

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Education**

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SYNONYMS

For the purposes of this research, I have used some words interchangeably. Most of these words have different definitions and I would not usually refrain from making these distinctions, however in the context of this thesis, I have ascribed the same interchangeable meaning. I felt this was justified, as it did not detract in any way from the meaning and the plausibility of the research; and in many ways, helped it stylistically in providing variety for the reader.

Student/graduate – both terms used to denote either current or ex-students; undergraduate or postgraduate.

Recruiter/employer – both terms used to describe those representing companies exhibiting at careers fairs and those responsible for the recruitment and selection process that follows.

Company/organisation – both terms used interchangeably to describe those entities that recruit and employ graduates. They resource the recruitment functions that exhibit at careers fairs.

University/institution – also used both terms to describe higher education providers in the UK

ACRONYMS

AGCAS – Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services

AGR – Association of Graduate Recruiters (became ISE in 2017)

DLHE – Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (survey by HESA until 2016/17 cohort)

HEI/HEP – Higher Education Institution/Provider

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

ISE – Institute of Student Employers

OfS – Office for Students

TA – Thematic analysis

ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to explore why those who attend university careers fairs choose to do so; what expectations they have and how these are formed; what motivates attendance; and how they themselves understand these choices. Furthermore, it aims to determine their interpretation of what happens at these events and the extent to which careers fairs facilitate access to the graduate labour market. The main unit of analysis is the individual participant and the findings are drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews with students, graduates, recruiters and careers services; contextualised by observations undertaken at two university careers fairs. The research adopts a Careership theoretical framework (Hodkinson et al, 1996) and utilises a thematic analysis approach (Braun et al, 2019). One of the main findings from this research are that rationales for attending are unique to the individual attending and expectations are manifold for students and recruiters alike, often based on intricate combinations of agency, structure and capital. Also, that there is a rich and multi-layered depth to the interactions that take place during the careers fair, primarily determined by how the protagonists choose to engage with others and the space itself. Finally, that careers fairs are a significant factor in making the transition from university to career, however more can be done to ensure that this transition is fair, inclusive and more effective for all involved.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Despite dramatic change in the higher education sector over the last 25 years one particular feature of university life has remained throughout and is still the most prominent manifestation of employer-student interaction on campus, the careers fair. Primarily, this investigation seeks to better understand these particular interactions by understanding how those involved in careers fairs understand them. My approach has been to explore how students, careers staff and recruiters interpret how they view and experience these events, and to add to our collective knowledge concerning these events. Firstly, it is important to look at the context that frames this investigation. In this section, I will provide some information on the background and purpose of careers fairs, some historical context and will finish by discussing the evolution of the events themselves.

The landscape of higher education in the UK has changed dramatically since the last fundamental reform to the structure of university provision in 1992. To list all these changes – and subsequent implications – would be an exhaustive task, but since 33 Polytechnics were granted University status by the 1992 Higher Education Act, we have seen, for instance, tuition fees replace grants; expansion and mass participation; the system of capped-numbers scrapped; the entry of private providers into the sector; and the welcoming of international students on an unprecedented scale. We have also seen the rise of ‘employability’ as both a reason for, and an outcome of, university education (Burke and Christie, 2018). To graduate with a set of skills and attributes designed to help secure career success - and provide the means to manage that career successfully for as long as necessary - has presented universities with a challenge, and an opportunity, to make the university

experience meaningful in relation to enhancing student employability, and also to differentiate themselves from competitors in the sector as one that produces employable graduates. It is within this context that the way a university interacts with employers has taken on greater importance as a key part of this employability agenda. To look at this relationship through the prism of a supply and demand for future talent, the significance of the employer-university interface - both in terms of higher education agenda and student recruitment - is clearly evident.

Background and purpose

“... There are more careers fairs than ever, on more campuses than ever, attended by more employers and students than ever.”

Gilworth (2018: 44)

Careers fairs are a well-established feature of the annual graduate recruitment cycle at most universities in the UK. Institutions hold such events in order to facilitate direct interaction between employers and students (primarily final year students), a task often coordinated by the university's careers service, and designed as a highly visible event that brings together these two key stakeholders.

Since the mid-1990s, many have been predicting that such fairs would have a diminishing role in the transitional process from university to the graduate labour market - becoming niche or peripheral at best. An article in Forbes asked the question in its title, 'Is the Careers Fair dead?' (Smith, 2012). Technological advances; the internet; sector diversification;

refinement of recruitment practice; resource constraints and so on, have all been offered up as reasons for their imminent demise (Gothard et al, 2001). However, over the last decade, these fairs have evolved from being the preserve of Russell Group or large civic universities, to becoming the focal point of employer liaison throughout the sector. A survey of university careers services undertaken by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) in 2016, found that more than 90% of AGCAS member institutions now ran such events at least annually, with 43% reporting that they had increased the number of and frequency of these fairs from the previous year. In addition to fairs with a distinctly individual institutional flavour, there has also been a recent increase in careers fairs unaligned to universities, operating as purely commercial profit-driven enterprises – hardly the type of new activity one associates with dying or decaying phenomena.

In the aforementioned AGCAS Market and Student Engagement Survey, it was also reported that approximately 65% of university careers services had also seen an increase in the numbers of employers attending careers fairs, from the previous year. For many employers, careers fairs remain the primary focal point of their graduate recruitment activities (High Fliers, 2017) with significant budgets and resources committed to attracting potential talent for their organisations. For students themselves, careers fairs can often provide the main opportunity for direct contact with recruiters prior to any application or selection stage, and are therefore an unparalleled chance to impress. This might go some way to explaining why 72% of universities (AGCAS survey, 2016) are reporting an increase in the numbers of students attending careers fairs

Careers fairs remain a key activity for universities in the UK especially as the modern graduate labour market is not only highly diverse, but also economic factors make the

transition between university and the world of work a potentially more challenging and competitive process than ever before (Wilson, 2012). In light of this, predictions of the imminent demise of careers fairs now seem far off the mark. Media reports pertaining to the death of such activity have been replaced by those heralding a resurgence of them, with *The Guardian*, for example, headlining an article on the 14th October 2014 - “Graduates in demand as employers flock back to university milkround”.

History

In order to understand the significance of career fairs to UK universities it is important to provide some history and context. Prior to the Robbins Report (1963) and the subsequent expansion of the UK university sector, the forerunners of university careers services, the Appointments Boards, had existed on campus simply to provide a matching service for both student and employer. Opportunities for each career and vocational pathway nearly always outweighed the number of those seeking them, and as such, generations of undergraduates had less cause to market themselves to prospective employers, than the employers did to attract candidates. Career choice was often focussed around three distinct options – public service; the professions; or to remain in academia – and any decision often influenced by personal networks, occupational background of family, or even geographical location.

The very nature of graduate recruitment was different, primarily because the nature of students, and the universities producing them, was also fundamentally different from now. Even as recent as 1980 we can see how radically different the sector was and therefore, it is possible to see why a different approach to recruitment was required. In 1980 there were just 42 universities in the UK, (130 in 2018); a graduating cohort each year of 68,000

(394,000 in 2018); this cohort was 63% male (43% in 2018); and only 35% of graduates achieved a 2:1 or a 1st (75% in 2018). Graduate recruiters in 1980 adhered to a strict code of practice, laid down by the Standing Conference of Employers of Graduates (SCOEG), of not making any contact with students until after they had completed Michaelmas term in their final year. As a result, employer activity on campus focussed on a relatively short period towards the end of a course – a window of opportunity ubiquitously known at the time as the Milkround.

It was during this Milkround that careers fairs would be arranged. Familiar features evident that would still be recognisable to this day, such as stands, banners, posters; all designed to facilitate conversations between recruiter and potential recruit. In fact, given all the fundamental changes and existential challenges universities have faced over the last several decades, the careers fair would appear to have remained relatively unscathed; stubbornly and resolutely recognisable as the same campus-based social interaction. My investigation, therefore, was designed to look beyond the superficial and explore whether the dynamics are what they ostensibly appear to have always been; and to shine a light on what occurs beneath this seemingly unaltered veneer.

The evolution of careers fairs

There are many common features to careers fairs that remain fundamental and easily identifiable, arguably features that are defining elements e.g. a large social space; a time-bounded open access event; the same two main protagonists of employers and students; brokered by university careers services; and so on; but even the most casual consideration of these events would suggest a process of continuing evolution. The needs and

expectations of students and employers, with regards to higher education, have changed and so it would be reasonable to expect careers fairs to have evolved over time rather than to have successfully weathered these changes unscathed. Based on my own observations over the years and background desk research, I have identified some of these changes, useful as background context, and grouped them under the following themes:

Mass expansion of higher education

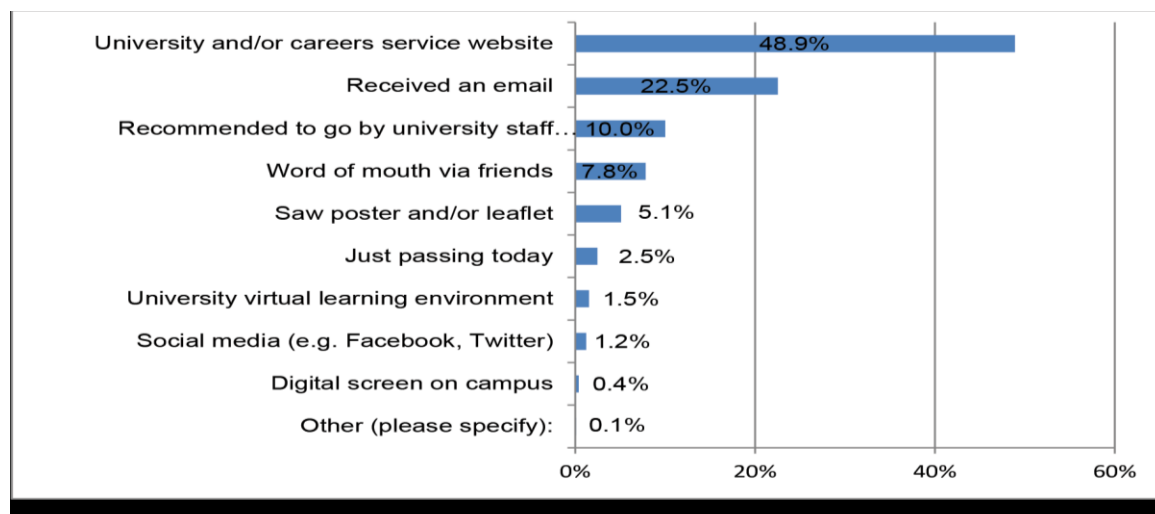
As highlighted previously, the increase in numbers participating in higher education has been phenomenal and has changed the landscape irrevocably. This has impacted upon the scale and nature of the graduate labour market (Mavromaras et al, 2013); the concept of supply and demand in relation to graduate talent (Verhaest and Van der Velden, 2012); the role of graduate destinations in determining 'value' and 'quality' of higher education provision (Pemberton et al, 2012); and not least the composition and background of students themselves (Gordon, 2013). As a result, universities have had to reflect on these factors and consider a more diverse approach given the new student dynamic and in order to maintain relevance. In one regard, as student numbers have increased so has the potential talent pool for graduate recruiters to draw upon; but this has added a number of additional levels of complexity to the ways students and employers interact on campus. The volume of students moving through higher education has challenged recruiters to examine the ways in which they engage with universities and has challenged the students themselves to ensure they are able to stand out from the crowd.

Technological advances

Careers fairs have not been immune from the technological revolution that has taken place over the last 30 years. The arrival of the internet; email communication; online recruitment; video interviewing; and more recently, digital advancement in relation to App technology, have all been embraced. This is evident across the sector, but it is more nuanced in the extent to which technology has replaced existing activity around careers fairs, or alternatively, the extent it has been used to enhance some activities. Technology has not killed off careers fairs – per Forbes prediction – but it has changed them significantly. For instance, with regards to the promotion and communications aspect of careers fairs, a recent survey by AGCAS (see Fig.1 below) asked participating students to identify the main channel through which they heard about these events - almost three quarters (74.4%) stated a channel of information that involved ‘new’ media or technology (e.g. website, email, VLE). This is pertinent to my study as I was interested in determining what motivated attendance, and how perceptions were formed by potential attendees.

Figure 1: Information channels through which students found out about careers fairs

(Source – AGCAS Careers Fairs Survey Report, 2017)



'The first year is the new final year' – Reaching a wider audience

Increasingly, graduate recruiters and university careers services have often looked upon the first year at university as the new final year – in essence, the desirable initial contact point for employer and students to interact, has shifted to an earlier stage of the university journey (Burke and Christie, 2018). The need for early career decisions, and the point at which students could be considered as a potential future recruit, is something that is no longer the preserve of those in the final stages of higher education.

From the perspective of universities, they are increasingly conscious of the fact that many students enter higher education with the primary aim of enhancing their future employability. Students frequently refer to employability when considering the wider benefits of HE (Tomlinson, 2014) and in the UCAS Applicant Survey 2012, (Respondent base: 9,745 UCAS applicants), 77% identified 'Career prospects/earning potential' as their primary motivation for applying to university. As such, it has become incumbent on universities to respond to this accordingly and provide an experience which goes some way to fulfilling these expressed expectations as soon as possible. This expectation from prospective and new students has changed the role and function of university careers services, as they have evolved from merely supporting the transition of finalists into the graduate labour market, to one that engages students at the earliest possible point and supports them on their journey. The idea that there would be an enforceable embargo on recruitment activity on campus until after the first term of the final year seems incredulous now. This also chimes with the assertion that employability is a constantly evolving process (Cole and Tibby, 2015) as an individual embarks on a journey towards becoming more employable rather than acquiring it in a single instance. To stretch this journey analogy even further; if an individual

student is the traveller, then employability is their luggage (i.e. those varied and unique combinations of skills, experiences, and attributes they carry with them and which makes them employable or otherwise) and their actual career plan is the 'map' they use to find their destination. By actively seeking to embark on this journey earlier, or because of timetabled exposure to a more employability-focused curriculum; new students are increasingly open and engaged with this process. The AGCAS First-Year Student Career Readiness Survey Report (2016) for instance, highlighted that two-thirds of their respondents (Base: 1,329) expected to encounter careers support from their careers service, in their first year.

For recruiters too, the mass expansion of higher education has made it an imperative to start the sifting and selection process earlier than was traditionally the case. To recruit and then develop a new graduate is a costly investment for any business, particularly if it is your main source of recruitment – as opposed to experienced hires for example, or you recruit a high volume of graduates each year. It is therefore crucial for these businesses to mitigate as much risk to this process, as is feasibly possible, to avoid the recruitment not working out. As such, early engagement and a longer, deeper relationship approach to potential recruits is an effective way of approaching this, ensuring that the student is the right fit for their organisation and equally, the organisation is the right fit for that particular student. This rationale has even led some high-volume graduate recruiters to start to target potential talent in schools and sixth forms. According to the Annual Survey 2017 of the national body that represents graduate recruiters, the Institute of Student Employers (ISE), direct hires by their members from schools and sixth forms was up 18% from 2016.

The annual careers fair has evolved to become an event where non-finalists are now a key target demographic, rather than an incidental attendee. During this study, I was particularly interested in how universities and recruiters have attempted to reconcile this development and whether it has affected the overall experience and perception of the event, as a recruitment tool rather than an awareness raising activity.

'Try before you buy' - The rise of placements

For a number of years now, graduate recruiters have increasingly recruited more graduates who have already worked for them previously, as a proportion of their intake – according to ISE (2017) the conversion rate from 2015 placement student cohort to 2017 graduate hire cohort was 42%. With a few exceptions (e.g. existing part-time staff gaining places on graduate schemes), the vast majority of this type of recruitment is made up of returning placement students, who have been back to university to complete their final year, and then returned on completion. Many recruiters are aiming to increase the numbers they recruit through this route, with a number recently implementing a conditional graduate job offer as a reward for successfully completing a placement year. In the legal, banking and accountancy sectors, this conversion rate is 79% or above (ISE, 2017). This has led to a more nuanced approach to the talent-sourcing relationship, between employers and the universities from which they recruit. This approach - whereby ostensibly graduate recruitment is an open and fair process, yet the criteria upon which selection is made - means a former placement student is well placed to succeed, particularly having spent 12 months absorbing the organisational culture and values; internal politics; strategic priorities; operational processes; building influential networks and friendships; and so on. This

advantage is further reinforced by the fact that many employers use the same selection process and assessment criteria for placement students and graduate recruits. As such, potential placement students - often in their second year of an undergraduate course - have also become a target for recruiters at careers fairs, with exhibitors expected to articulate a company's work experience offer in addition to promoting their graduate schemes. In fact, 71.9% of student respondents in the AGCAS Careers Fair survey (2017) agreed with the statement 'I know more about work experience opportunities' as a result of attending a fair. This study sought to determine how expectations and interactions concerning work-based opportunities in their wider sense had changed both perceptions and the nature of engagement at careers fairs.

Sector/course specific events

For many years, often due to resource or logistical considerations, universities would focus primarily on one all-encompassing careers fair, aimed at all disciplines and involving employers representing all sectors. The rationale for this is perfectly sound, given that the majority of graduate opportunities are open to graduates of all and any disciplines, 82% according to ISE (2017). It is therefore an effective way of building up critical mass for a successful and well-attended event. It is also a good way to ensure students do not miss potential opportunities because their career choices have been pre-judged based on subject studied. Historians, for example, can be interested in HR careers, in the same way an Engineering undergraduate might yearn for a career in supply-chain management, so it is important that students have access to events that reflect this diversity. However, a cursory look across the sector over the last few years shows an increased proliferation of targeted

events. Several universities offer a calendar of sector specific careers fairs, often culminating in one large-scale generic event; some now host a series of smaller careers fairs clustered together and branded as employability festivals, with a model based around the iconic cultural/music events so popular in the UK. These festivals are constructed of mini-events, themed around sectors, geographically spread over campus (similar to stages at a festival), and concentrated over a few days. This is an important element to address at the outset of this particular investigation. Given the practical decision-making required to focus on piece of research that is plausible and practically achievable within the constraints of a doctoral thesis, I decided to concentrate on the larger all-encompassing university-wide careers fairs. Nevertheless, as outlined in my final chapter, sector-specific careers events are a worthy subject of investigation in their own right and should be the focus of further enquiry.

Charging and commercialisation of careers fairs

As with many aspects of higher education, the marketisation of the sector as a whole has attracted interest from both within and external to the sector. Government policies that encouraged the expansion of the HE sector have led to competition between universities, with students positioned as consumers. Students see studying for a degree as a service that they have paid for, therefore, demanding more choice and a greater return on their investment (Molesworth, 2011). As such, many universities will regard the relative positive employability record of their graduates as a strategic imperative and therefore will do whatever is necessary to maximise this aspect. This includes investing money to attract potential employers onto campus. Some universities may find it easier to attract employers than others do. A campus-based post-92 university in a less accessible part of the UK, with a

profile of students that may not have traditionally yielded high numbers of graduate recruits for a company previously may struggle to persuade or incentivise a recruiter to attend a careers fair. Similarly, if you are one of the universities that consistently places in the top 10 on the High Fliers list (see Fig.2 below) then often the challenge is one of managing demand and determining which companies can obtain privileged access to their students and how much those recruiters are willing to pay for that access.

Figure 2: Universities targeted by the largest number of top* employers 2017

**The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*

(Source: High Fliers Research Ltd 2018)

	Ranking in 'Good University Guide' *		Ranking in 'Good University Guide' *
1. Manchester	25	14. London Imperial College	4
2. Birmingham	15	15. Sheffield	21
3. Warwick	9	16. London School of Economics	11
4. Bristol	16	17. Southampton	30
5. London University College	7	18. Loughborough	7
6. Cambridge	1	19. London King's College	28
7. Leeds	10	20. Newcastle	26
8. Nottingham	18	21. York	16
9. Oxford	2	22. Cardiff	35
10. Durham	5	23. Leicester	34
11. Bath	12	24. Glasgow	20
12. Exeter	14	25. Liverpool	42
13. Edinburgh	24		

Source - The Graduate Market in 2018

* The Times & Sunday Times Good University Guide 2018

The challenge faced by those listed above, where it is often about managing demand for coveted exhibition space on campus, and those at the other end of the spectrum who battle to attract and incentivise employers to engage, is vastly different in many respects. This

makes for a very particular set of relationships that in reality is unique to individual universities and the employers they seek to work with. Having an understanding of this dynamic and its implications is fundamentally linked to the role careers fairs play in either reinforcing or breaking down barriers to the graduate labour market. If an institution struggles to attract the number or calibre of recruiter onto campus and in addition, they tend to have a student demographic profile that data tells us makes transition from course to graduate job a particular challenge, then these two factors can compound structural disadvantage. As this gap widens - or at least, little is done to narrow it - this can also affect access to opportunity and, as such, the social mobility mission that universities passionately promulgate, and many graduate employers are publicly very keen to embrace. These aspects formed a key part of this study, in particular related to my research question that sought to determine the potential careers fairs have to facilitate fairer access to the graduate labour market in the UK.

'A privilege not a right' - Incentivising access

The diversification of careers fairs on campus seems also to have created challenges for students as well as employers. If employers need to justify expenditure, against finite budget lines, and make business-based decisions on which careers fairs to attend (if any), then it follows that they will want to ensure that they are exposed to high-calibre, well-prepared, potential recruits and not just hundreds of students asking them who they are or simply scooping up 'freebies'. Many careers services involved in organising careers fairs have realised this and have undertaken to put measures in place to move away from success based on the volume of interactions alone, to one that moves the focus to quality, not

quantity. A number have experimented with *No prep, No entry* policy for their Careers Fairs; the 'prep' element involved attending a series of workshops in the weeks leading up to the event covering aspects such as creating a CV; how to research companies; questions to ask; how to project a professional image; and so on. Other universities have adopted similar preparation stages, but without the mandatory element, offering privileged access for the first hour of the careers fair exclusive; all based on the assumption that quantity of students attending is too crude a measure to evaluate careers fair worthiness, and that most recruiters would like fewer conversations but with better prepared more informed students.

Conclusion

The aspects highlighted in this section are designed to add a depth and contextual flavour to careers fairs. It is not an exhaustive selection by any means; more a reflection of some of the recent developments and challenges those involved face. This chapter serves as an introduction to the world within which my study is situated. Building upon this, the following chapter explores the extant literature available in order to frame my research further.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will examine previously published research that is pertinent to the subject of my study and relates to areas of career decision-making and transition from higher education into the labour market. In particular, it will include a focus on the impact of university-business engagement on this process. Drawing upon this previous work, my aim is to attempt to highlight, interpret and synthesise literature (Merriam 1988: 6) which can provide context, and an ongoing point of reference, within which I can place my own research and give it meaning within the field as a whole. The literature will provide a background and depth to the subject, but will also help inform and frame the thesis argument. Bruce (1994: 218) describes this particular role of a literature review as influencing both the 'process and the product' of the research. My intention is to create a robust rationale for the choices made, as well as establishing a basis of credibility to demonstrate that I possess an authoritative and authentic voice in this field.

A prime motivation for choosing to focus on the role of careers fairs, in relation to career decision-making and graduate progression, was the apparent scarcity of existing research relating to this subject. My literature review will show that, although there is a lack of previous studies on careers fairs specifically, there is a wealth of related literature linked to not only career choice but also to other activities at university that sit alongside careers fairs, such as individual career guidance, curriculum-based employability, and work integrated learning. These related areas will play a key role in my literature review and demonstrate legitimacy concerning both purpose and eventual findings. As such, although

little of the literature covers careers fairs specifically, it is undoubtedly collateral to my area of study and therefore significant to its understanding.

Context

Previous empirical research in this field has focussed on specific elements of career guidance in relation to its development and effectiveness as an activity in its own right and as a wider part of a process of engagement. A number have focussed on one-to-one guidance interventions, from a student's perspective (Bimrose et al., 2004) and a practitioner's perspective (Hambly and Bomford, 2018). Some have led investigations in more detail as to how these one-to-one interventions are experienced by particular groups of students, for example, BAME students (Carter et al., 2003), pre-entry applicants (Marsland, 2001), students with disabilities (Morey et al., 2003). Others have focussed on particular manifestations of guidance intervention, for example E-Guidance (Madahar and Offer, 2004) and digital career coaching (Bimrose, 2016). The rise of curricular-based employability initiatives in the last 10 years has also been accompanied by significant work surrounding the impact of these on both career-decision making (Bridgstock et al, 2019) and efficacy as indicators of future career success (Jackson and Wilton, 2017). In addition, those embedded careers-related activities that constitute application of learning in the workplace have also been investigated (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017). The proliferation of part-time work, for example, as a common feature of a student's time at university has also attracted the attention of researchers looking at career-decision making (Hodgson and Spours, 2001), in particular with regard to the development of transferable skills.

Another approach has been to study defined groups of students based on the level and/or type of course, for instance, Bowman et al (2005) focussed on full-time UK-based Masters students; whereas others have examined career progression within the context of perceived influences, such as socio-economic factors (Cooter et al., 2004); ethnicity and race (Marshall, 2018); and gender (Purcell and Elias, 2002; O’Leary, 2017). What is missing however, is a look at all these factors within the contained context of the university careers fair where perhaps these elements, and potentially others such as social capital or lack of it (Clarke, 2018), could come to the fore. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In order to attempt to make sense of this disparate literature, and to ensure that relative merit is placed on themes that have the potential to address my research aims and questions, I have decided to focus on three specific areas:

- Career guidance interventions and the career decision-making process
- Universities and employability
- Employer engagement in higher education

Career guidance interventions and the career decision-making process

A widely used definition of career guidance was created jointly by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank in 2004. This will be the definition of the term ‘career guidance’ in this literature review. It states the following:

Career guidance refers to services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their life, to make educational, training and

occupational choices and to manage their career. Such services may be found in schools, universities and colleges, in training institutions, in public employment services, in the workplace, in the voluntary or community sector and in the private sector. The activities may take place on an individual or group basis, and may be face-to-face or at a distance, including help lines and web-based services.

(OECD, 2004)

The relative ascendancy, or otherwise, of certain theories relating to career guidance, can often be tracked in relation to periods of socio-economic upheaval and transition in society. Periods of buoyancy in the labour market can often bring those theories that focus on the primacy of individual choice and free agency; conversely, a highly competitive or constricting labour market can highlight approaches that focus on opportunity awareness and perceived accessibility as key factors in career choice. From the 1960s through to the mid-1980s, it was the latter perspective that led to a focus on structural and macro-economic factors in relation to career choice. Much of our understanding was framed by seminal works such as Roberts (1968), Willis (1977) and Wallace (1987) who argued that new entrants to the labour market, from the education system, progress as a product of the opportunities open to them, however narrow or restricted the notion of choice might be within their particular context. Furthermore, Wallace argued that these notional choices were then further restricted and/or reinforced by expectations placed on young people by key influencers such as peers, parents and teachers. Their findings were based on factors such as the domination of particular industries in certain areas; the lack of mobility in the work force; an education system that purposefully narrowed choice; government economic policy; a robust social class system; and restricted access to professions. For all but a

privileged few, genuine career choice was a myth and all that mattered in reality was the opportunities that you realistically had access to; only at this point could careers advice play any kind of meaningful role, and only then in supporting this particular transition (Willis, 1977). This was of particular interest to me in relation to careers fairs, as I was interested in determining whether they are designed to reaffirm notions of a narrow-focused career pathway based around subject of study or location; or are they opportunities to do the opposite and in fact broaden horizons.

These works on structural and opportunity-based career theory, promoted the idea that occupational choice was a myth, and that a determining factor is more likely to be social stratification rather than individual choice (Roberts, 1997). Roberts felt that an individual's socioeconomic status, level of education, family background, gender or race, eroded individual choice and agency. This led to the scope for choice being limited and in some cases illusory. These theories have evolved over time, becoming more nuanced by embracing elements of individualisation in the form of people taking personal responsibility of their career progression. However, it still holds that careers interventions, such as careers fairs, could only ever help students to function within constraints beyond their control and 'cannot hasten transitions, dispel uncertainties, enable individuals to obtain jobs for which they remain unqualified, or alter specific occupational profiles in particular labour markets' (Roberts, 1997: 352).

In contrast to this position, there is a well-established tradition in career guidance of individuals determining their own futures (Savickas, 2005). This free agency view holds that, in conjunction with appropriate and well-timed specialist interventions, of which a careers fair would be one, people can empower themselves to fulfil their potential and transition

into successful careers. Although originally developed by the likes of Holland (1986; 1997), subsequent manifestations of this approach can also be seen in constructivist approaches to careers work that promote individual agency through a more holistic approach. This considers the whole individual rather than specific limited elements (McMahon and Patton, 2006) and has led to the proliferation of the careers counselling model (Ali and Graham, 2004) amongst professional practitioners in HE careers services, as well as an increased focus on life stories and case studies as a means of relating career theory and practice (Swanson and Fouad, 1999). These approaches transcend ideas of trying to fit people into jobs and focus instead on the personal narrative, addressing the needs of the whole person through a recognition that 'the distinction between personal and career is a wall created by words' (Savickas 1993: 211).

There is however, a third dimension to this debate, which is where I intend to frame my particular study. This position arguably aligns itself in the social science tradition of Bourdieu's habitus (1977; 1984; 1993) and also Giddens's structuration theory (1984; 1991), namely that choice, and therefore career choice, is genuine - however it must always be culturally and socially situated as these are the conditions with which we live and are influenced by. As Hodkinson et al (1996: 147) contend, these factors are 'inseparably interrelated' and from this position the notion of Careership (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) is proposed as a way of embracing the influence of both structure and agency on a process where 'everything takes place within a macro-context which has social, political, economic, cultural, geographical and historical dimensions' (1997: 41). Careership theory was developed in an attempt to reconcile the seemingly opposing stances of the traditional theories and attempted to do the following: blend social and cultural factors with individual

choice, develop a more sophisticated model of learning, and combine personal preferences with opportunity structures that also take into account happenstance. Proponents claim that career decision making is not necessarily rational nor is career progression linear. In fact, both are strongly influenced by actions, events and circumstances that can be beyond a person's control. The theory has three overlapping themes - the position (or habitus) of the individual; relationships between forces acting in the field where career decisions are being made; and the ongoing career journey and progression of the individual. For the purpose of this study, the first two themes are key. Linking back to Bourdieu's notion of *field* adds a deeper dimension to what is referred to as the external environment. Field theory suggests that the external environment is dynamic, complex and consists of interacting and, often unequal, forces. Careership claims that career related decisions are influenced by a person's position in the field, the nature of the field, and the embodied dispositions (habitus) of the person. A key feature of Careership is the concept that career decision-making behaviour is bounded by a person's *horizon for action*. An individual's progress, success and development is shaped by the dispositions of that individual and their horizon for action that can facilitate and limit opportunities at any one time. A person's horizon for action is influenced by their position in a particular field, by the nature of the field and their embodied dispositions. The field and individual dispositions interact with each other and an horizon for action are established. An individual always exerts a major influence on their own horizon for action and Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain this. Within the context of this study, the careers fair (in particular its organisation and recruiter composition), could be regarded as a horizon for action as they represent one example of a constructed interaction between 'education and labour markets and the dispositions of the individual' (Hodkinson et al., 2006: 3). Another element of Careership theory that resonates

with careers fairs is the concept that change can be seen as a succession of routine, occasionally interspersed with significant change via *turning points*. Although the relative merit and significance of these turning points can be a matter of interpretation and may have been previously over-simplified (Hodkinson et al., 2006), nevertheless experiencing a careers fair, as a student, has the potential to be such an instance of significant change. Careership theory is an appropriate prism through which to investigate careers fairs; and, as evident in subsequent chapters, will provide my conceptual framework throughout.

Universities and employability

According to Schmidt and Barger (2013) universities are now drivers of personal effectiveness and citizenship and have a pivotal role for 'preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society' (2013: 5). Previously, this relationship between higher education and the production of future citizens able to contribute positively, in an economic sense at least, was primarily seen as a consequence - rather than a purpose - of university (Kettis et al, 2013), yet for many institutions, and students themselves, this is now viewed as a primary objective (Rich, 2015). In fact it has even been described as 'a moral duty for higher education' (Artess et al, 2017), where universities are under immense pressure from policymakers, students, parents, and employers to ensure graduates are job-ready for entering and thriving in the labour market. Views around the role of higher education in society, remains an active debate and touches upon the central purpose of universities i.e. to pursue and generate knowledge for its own sake; or to develop students (the future workforce) for the greater good of the economy and society. Unequivocally, Speight et al (2013) contend that an unhealthy focus on employability is a direct threat to disciplinary

knowledge, as it eats into valuable curriculum time and detracts from subject specialism. A view that gains further credibility if, as Knight and Yorke (2000) suggest, this move to a greater focus on employability, means the value of a particular university course has been recalibrated in that the degree subject studied is no longer as important as the graduate's ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively. However, this view runs the risk of creating a false dichotomy between the aim of academics to convey knowledge and develop critical thought, and the end-users of the higher education experience (which includes employers). Brown et al (2008) suggest that the two things are not mutually exclusive - nor are they competing for the same space - but are co-contributors to a buoyant knowledge-economy.

Before considering specific elements of employability activity – as covered in existing literature – it is necessary to understand the context as far as UK higher education is concerned. Firstly, employability is unlikely to be a passing ephemeral expedient in higher education, as it now forms part of public policy towards the university sector, rather than simply being reliant on individual institutional choice to prioritise it or not; a position most obviously manifest in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) with a third weighting on metrics related to employability measures. Secondly, given the marketisation of the sector (Molesworth et al, 2011), employability is firmly entrenched as both a motivating factor for consumers (students) to consider, and as a differentiator in the market place for the providers (HEA, 2013). This is why it has become increasingly imperative to examine attempts to enhance employability (such as careers fairs), given the significance and proliferation in the sector. The prominence of employability as a driving force for change and as a strategic consideration, offers huge opportunities for universities, but also presents

significant challenges and, although academic interest is growing (Tomlinson, 2012), it is still in its relative infancy which makes it an area ripe for further investigation.

To make sense of the many growing elements to employability at universities, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) devised a framework, intended to present all the varying aspects of an employability eco-system, in what they describe as a ‘holistic challenge’ faced by universities (2009: 17). The resulting ‘Employability Wheel’ – illustrated below (Fig.3) – demonstrates the complexity of this challenge. Starting with the three critical factors (Leadership & Resources; Employer Engagement; Programme Design & Delivery), the wheel moves outwards covering ‘Key Features’ of employability and then ultimately the impact on the learner, employer and provider:

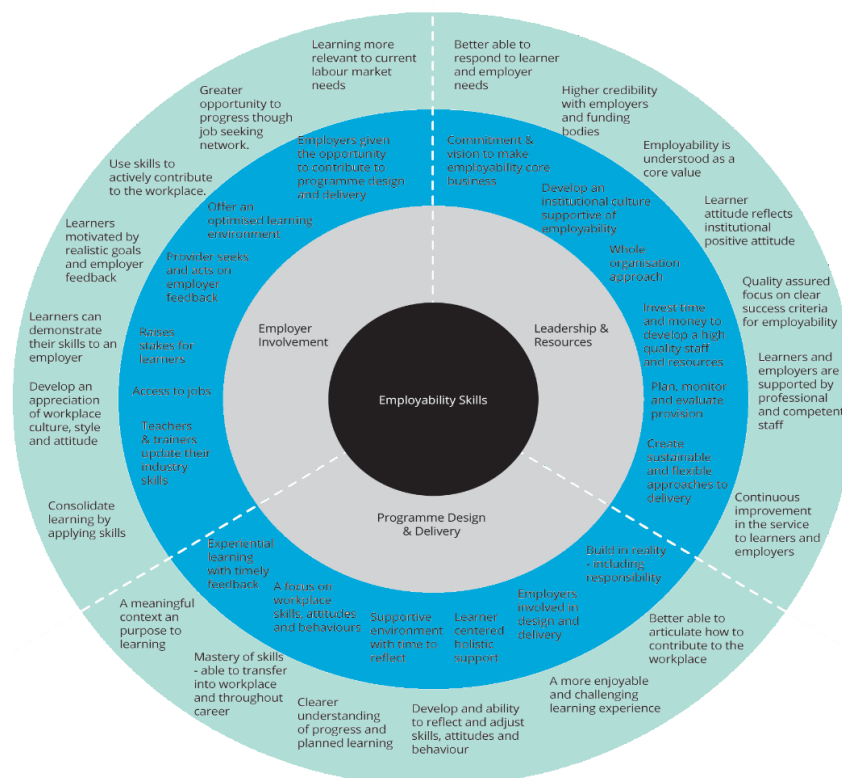


Figure 3. Employability Skills Wheel (UKCES, 2009: 17)

Just a cursory consideration of careers fairs in relation to the elements above, demonstrates that they are a pivotal part of this holistic view. This adds a greater resonance and rationale to the decision to focus on this activity in this study, particularly given the scarcity of previous scholarship on this specific aspect. Building upon this notion of a holistic approach, Cole and Tibby (2013) argued that for such a model to work and remain coherent for all stakeholders, universities must lead the narrative around employability and all its manifestations (including careers fairs), rather than assume employers, learners and academics understood its meaning and its nuanced interconnectivity. This includes establishing an 'interpretation of what employability is, how it can be translated into practice, how students and staff can be engaged with this, current practice and gaps in provision, and how to monitor progress' (2013: 5). To articulate this they created an iterative framework for universities, below (Fig 4):



Figure 4: Framework for Employability (Cole and Tibby, 2013:10)

This has the potential to place careers fair activity within a wider institutional context; supporting a wider narrative around institutionally-driven employability, rather than merely facilitating stand-alone employability activities. Cole and Tibby (2013) also set out a range of areas which group activity under related themes. These are extensive, but several aspects are worthy of focussing on as they provide meaningful context in relation to my investigation, in particular with regard to how students acquire and develop the career literacy and capital to make themselves more desirable in the eyes of potential and future employers, namely skills and attributes – explored further in the next section.

Skills and attributes

As universities strive to find ways to support and enhance students' employability through curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular initiatives, one area of effort has centred on graduate attributes – the skills, competencies, values and behaviours that an individual student can potentially acquire and/or develop as a consequence of their university experience in its wider sense (both in the curriculum and beyond). Attempts to define and list these attributes have been manifold. One approach resulted in at least 30 different capabilities being highlighted (Jones and Warnock, 2014) - and these are just the ones grounded in the UK higher education experience. In a global market for graduates, it is useful to note, as Oria (2012) rightly asserts, these can also vary across countries and cultures, primarily in the relative emphasis and value placed on them, and dependent on the nature of the university experience itself. Daniels and Brooker (2014) offer a cautious note to those who regard these skills as merely something to acquire and link relative value to the total number obtained. Instead, students should aspire for something much longer-

lasting – ‘building an awareness of their student identity as they progress through their higher education experience is not only important for student engagement at university, but is also an integral aspect of shaping their work-readiness as graduates’ (2014 65). Therefore, at a careers fair, it is the combination, balance and appropriateness of these attributes that recruiters will assess for potential and suitability, rather than the ability to accumulate as many of them as possible. Rust (2016) develops this further as he argues that true worth comes from being able to ‘synthesise attributes’ and will only have tangible currency to a future employer if a student knows what attributes they possess, how they work together and how to articulate them. This naturally leads to a consideration of how employers themselves perceive and understand attributes and notions of gradueness. Any misalignment or deviation from this could create issues; particularly at a key interface such as a careers fair (Wilton, 2014). Likewise, if universities and employers are unable to reach a consensus as to the meaning of these skills and how they may manifest themselves, it is hardly surprising then, that many graduates struggle to display them to recruiters either at fairs on campus, or within the job selection process. Wilton also further asserts that this issue of misalignment is further aggravated by the fact that although some aspects of the recruitment process are explicit, much is implicit and many sought after skills remain ‘subjective, shifting and often unknown to the students’ (2014: 242). This ultimately has the potential to create a fundamental fault line in the notion of transition between university and employment, particularly one focused on a delicately balanced model of supply and demand. The mere perception of a discrepancy between the skills universities believe they are equipping their students with and the ability of employers to recognise that these same students have acquired these skills, makes interactions such a careers fairs all the more critical for effective recruitment and selection. Of course, the employers have the

opportunity at careers fairs to undertake some exploratory assessment directly with the students themselves, yet this could also simply illuminate existing perceived discrepancies and miscommunication of attributes.

Behaviours and values

Sitting alongside the more overt skills and attributes that constitute a student's level of employability, are aspects of the human condition that are innate and personal (Greenbank, 2015). These can over time be finessed and developed, but are more difficult to reduce to a list or assess in terms of selection. Nevertheless, they are strikingly powerful determinants of a student's employability and accurate indicator of the ability to function effectively in the world of work. Greenbank identifies the following in particular – decision-making; self-belief and self-efficacy; proactivity; confidence; and integrity – as key features of employability-related behaviours and argues that, both curricular and extra-curricular activities have the capacity to promote positive change in behaviour. By utilising 'transformative pedagogies', which facilitate critical self-reflection of previous decisions, this will motivate students 'to consider alternative approaches to the ones they normally adopt' (2015: 197). Hazenberg et al (2015) refer to the ability of students to change their behaviours, for the purposes of enhancing their employability, as 'behavioural plasticity', therefore greater preparation in the lead up to encounters with recruiters, such as careers fairs, should positively influence eventual employment success. Turner (2014) develops the notion of self-belief leading to greater self-efficacy, as a means for the student to assert a level of control or agency on their 'employability action' (2014: 593). If the curriculum provides opportunities for students to master certain experiences they will feel greater

control over their career goals and choices; a force for 'agentic behaviour' and ownership that sits alongside more traditional notions that employability needs to be acquired or 'fixed' (2014: 598). For the purposes of my investigation, it was fascinating to explore the level of belief and career control students feel they possess and how this manifests itself within the careers fair setting. If universities encourage students to take more ownership of their own career direction and factor in opportunities for them to feel empowered about the decisions they make, then careers fairs take on a potentially pedagogical role as well as the more accepted recruitment-based transactional one.

Social and cultural awareness

As will be seen in subsequent chapters, I have attempted to frame careers fairs as social spaces made up of a multitude of differing perspectives and different interactions. Yet these are not spaces where chaos rules; on the contrary, as Clark and Zukas (2013) suggest, student and employer interactions are often framed by a number of established relational elements that have evolved over the years to help participants make sense of the environment and how it works. Their particular research focused on the journey of an IT student progressing into that industry and used Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and capital to frame that particular student's understanding of the world of work more generally, and the IT sector in particular. As a careers fair is a time-bounded and physically contained social space, Bourdieu's concepts provide an appealing prism through which to examine aspects of it, not least how a student prepares and conducts themselves, especially if this is their first time in such a space. The relative social and cultural capital a student holds could easily affect their perception of what happens (Burke, 2015) and also the

subjective worth they feel they get from attending. Likewise, recruiters may respond in different ways to students based on these factors. I will return to this in more detail in the Methodology chapter, but the literature does indeed suggest that the accumulation and articulation of cultural capital can be a significant factor in measuring for potential for success in transitioning to the graduate labour market (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015). Furthermore, 'it is the understanding of cultural norms and expectations of the workplace that students need in order to make an effective transition' (Artess et al, 2017: 16). This therefore begs the question, are students who have characteristics and backgrounds that would point to lower levels of this cultural capital (first generation; non-traditional entry qualifications; lower socio-economic backgrounds) at a structural disadvantage in getting the most from interactions with employers – such as careers fairs – and if so, what can/should universities and employers be doing about it? This is not just an abstract question either – there are practical aspects to this too. This will be addressed as part of this study as I will be investigating what changes could be made to careers fairs to ensure all students have fair access to the graduate labour market.

Cutts et al (2015), focus their research on one particular aspect of this - namely dress and appearance as a carrier of cultural capital. They suggest that hair, clothes, make-up, tattoos, and so on, can all help or hinder a smooth transition to the graduate workplace – 'the new environment in which they find themselves presents as a new habitus, which the graduate, if they want to fit in, will need to identify, analyse and adopt.' (2015: 271). This is particularly pertinent to the careers fair environment too, as a multitude of first impressions are being made in one concentrated social space.

Employer engagement in Higher Education

The elevation in status of universities from seats of learning to ‘national resource that has a central role to play in supporting UK business success’ (Wilson, 2012: 13) did not occur overnight. There has been an evolution in the way that universities themselves view their role in terms of contributing to local, regional and national economic success (Naylor et al, 2015) and, as discussed previously, even taking on a wider moral and civic responsibility on behalf of society. Government policy initiatives have proactively sought to cultivate multi-faceted university-business collaboration across the sector (Leitch, 2006). The government white paper ‘Realising our Potential’ (1993), established a model of knowledge sharing and applied research which is still used to this day to maximise the potential for university research to find an outlet in industry in areas such as shared intellectual property, technology spin-outs, and simplified licensing and patenting arrangements. A relationship that eventually formed the basis for significant catalyst and innovation funding, as well as a series of subsequent high-profile government papers and reviews, such as Lambert (2003) and Warry (2006). Yet the concept of university-business collaboration with a focus on universities as the supplier of graduates, working in multi-faceted ways with employers to enhance economic performance, has only recently been held up as an intentional and measurable aim (Wilson, 2012). As a result, this has led to a proliferation of employer engagement activities – some new, others building on existing hitherto peripheral activity - from innovation in curriculum teaching and learning; integrated placement and internship programmes; industry-designed modules/courses; ‘live’ project briefs; and mentoring schemes. Many of these have subsequently been the focus of investigation by researchers, which I will endeavour to review in this section.

The coming together of two worlds (universities and businesses) - a relationship often brokered by a third party (government) - was never going to be straightforward. Not just in detail but also at a macro level where real tension arises in assigning responsibility to ensuring this relationship is a successful one. Rowland (2003) is concerned that government initiatives all seem to suggest that this engagement is a one-way thing in that 'global economies are not expected to respond to critical research produced by higher education, only that higher education must respond to the needs of the global economy' (2003: 54). However, Kewin et al (2009) have argued that universities need to do much more to reach out to industry and highlight the potential benefits of engagement, and counter a lack of awareness and understanding on the part of employers as to the value HE can add to their businesses.

The expansion of higher education, and the increase in expectations of students in terms of return on investment, means that it is now a 'mass system educating everyone for everything' (Behle et al, 2015: 1); and as such, universities have endeavoured to determine at which points, and in what form, they can infuse employer engagement into the learning experience. Many have taken a multi-faceted approach, building from the baseline transactional nature of the relationship - namely placing and promoting vacancies to the student body – through to developing more nuanced partnerships with less immediate and more varied returns. Many researchers have explored the proliferation of work-based learning over recent years. Brookes and Youngson (2014), for instance, analysed the correlation such activity has on career progression, concluding that 'students taking a placement were 50% more likely to find graduate level work' (2014: 1572). Findings that reinforce earlier studies such as Moores and Reddy (2012) - namely that completing a

placement is associated with 'improved academic performance in the final year of study with students more likely to secure appropriate graduate-level work and higher starting salaries upon completion of their degree in comparison to non-placement students.' (2014: 1563). These conclusions were derived from a cross-cohort group of students from different disciplines, but others, such as Weiss and Klein (2014), have claimed it is more nuanced than that, suggesting it can depend on whether these opportunities are voluntary or mandatory; paid or unpaid; and in particular, how close the subject lends itself to a particular vocation or profession. This is particularly pertinent to my research as careers fairs often come in two different formats – as mentioned in previous chapter – large scale generic events aimed at all students (the subject of my study) and smaller scale targeted ones aimed at specific students on particular courses. It was interesting therefore to see whether participants' perceptions of the efficacy and relevance of events, favours one type or the other.

Placements are just one example of curriculum-based employer engagement but they are not the only element of this to have been investigated. Previous research has examined shorter, less formal work-based experiences such as graduate internships (Helyer and Lee, 2014) finding them to be of benefit to all parties concerned (graduates, employers and the institutions) impacting positively on employment progression and skills development, to the extent that it was recommended that these should be integrated into the degree programme as a post-graduation activity. This has also manifested itself at careers fairs with the numbers of exhibitors offering graduate internships, alongside their more traditional graduate scheme offer, increasing significantly.

Bringing employers onto campus to speak directly with students is regarded as an impactful way of raising interest and aspiration amongst students (Milman and Whitney, 2014). Many

universities have extra-curricular 'recruiters in residence' programmes, and a number even embed employer guest lectures into the curriculum. Reibe et al (2013) examined the impact of guest speakers from industry and professions, and found that this could have a positive impact on active learning and development of students, providing the speakers were 'appropriately briefed, qualified, interesting and engaging' (2013: 55). This has parallels with conversations that can take place between employers and students at careers fairs, particularly the perception on the part of the students, that they are engaging with someone who has appropriate credibility in order to convey information, advice or guidance to them. This notion was further explored by Roehling and Cavanaugh (2000) who concluded that students responded better to employer representatives who were 'knowledgeable about the company and the positions available and demonstrated an interest in the job seeker themselves' (2000: 4). This presents a challenge to recruiters, in that the value they extract from engaging with students directly, is linked to the quality of the interactions as perceived by the students themselves. Furthermore, that 'empathetic behaviour, preparation and an ability to supply information is predictive of a student's perception of the encounter and how favourable they are toward a certain company as well as their readiness to follow a job opportunity' (Silkes et al, 2010: 121). In other words, the research suggests that in terms of careers fairs, what recruiters get from the experience is in some way linked to the effort and preparation they put in. According to Hansen (2006), at a basic level, the role the two main protagonists (student and recruiter) fulfil at a careers fair is understood and accepted by all those involved – companies have positions to fill and students need job opportunities to transition to after university. The event is one way of bringing these two parties together, as part of 'a dual process as applicants and employers assess each other' (Silkes et al, 2010: 121). However, Hansen's findings also pointed to

other, more nuanced, elements at work, such as companies attending to increase brand awareness on campus; to assess the competition in relation to rival companies operating in the same industry or sector; and to ensure ongoing connectivity with a demographic that perhaps represents a generational shift from a company's existing customers and staff. These are notions I explored with the data as part of my study, as I wanted to challenge the established surface-level superficiality of the interaction at careers fairs, and investigate what else was happening. Focussing on employer perceptions, Gordon et al (2014) also found that although recruiters use such events to fill skills shortages, source new talent and assist in the recruitment of high-volume, high-calibre candidates in a cost and time effective way; but they also view attending as a wider opportunity, with one recruiter stating that 'spending money on careers fairs overall is well worth it given the amount of exposure a company can obtain and the number of people it can reach' (2014: 2). These collateral benefits, as perceived by employers, is something probed further in my research by investigating employers motivations for attending careers fairs, and the activities and interactions that take place during the events.

As well as the above, one area I intend to explore in my investigation relates to a notion previously described by Porter et al (2004) as 'critical contact'. This refers to connections made during a recruitment process – prior to employment – that creates and strengthens the bond between applicant and recruiter. This critical contact phase can be affected by the personalities of the recruiters representing a company (DeBell et al, 1998) as well as signal to applicants the culture, values and ethos of a particular organisation, often at a subliminal level (Brice and Waung, 2002). Furthermore, Silkes et al (2010) found that 'job aspirants who have a positive perception of the selection process are more likely to hold an

organisation in higher regard, to accept job offers, and to recommend the employers to others; however negative perceptions may result in the loss of top candidates who may persuade others to avoid that organisation entirely' (2010: 120). It is clear therefore - given the level of finance and resource companies invest in careers fairs and their wider presence on campus and in the curriculum - the potential rewards for those who get this right are huge and, conversely, the damage that could occur to those who misjudge their efforts is equally as significant. Silkes et al (2010) also found that so significant is 'the relationship between recruiter characteristics and intentions of accepting a job ... it is very important that organisations produce effective recruiters since they have such a strong influence on job candidates' perceptions of a company' (2010: 120). As a result, Hansen (2006) has identified a trend to send recent graduates, designed to create an empathetic bond between recruiter and student. Whereas Gordon et al (2014) found that utilising graduates of the same institution, if possible, further reinforced this approach as 'alumni enjoy giving careers advice and students sometimes feel more comfortable speaking with a young alumnus compared to a recruiter' (2014: 2).

As can be seen, there exists a plethora of possible ways in which universities (and their students) and businesses can collaborate and interact with each other. These have varying degrees of impact and can manifest themselves in many different ways depending on the contextual factors including the student demographic and background; type of employer/institution; the value placed on the interaction; and the nature of the individuals involved. One tool, designed to make sense of all this, has been offered up by Covey (2014), building on his initial work in this area in 1989, and his aim to develop a model of 'win-win' principles for university/employer engagement - based on stakeholder analysis, mutual

benefit, and a better understanding of existing relationships. This has led to the creation of a relationship matrix where universities can plot 'their existing engagement, identify where mutual value is not being explored, where additional value can be gained, where relationships are one way with the employer gaining all the benefits, and potentially where employers are indifferent to relationship building efforts' (2014: 217).

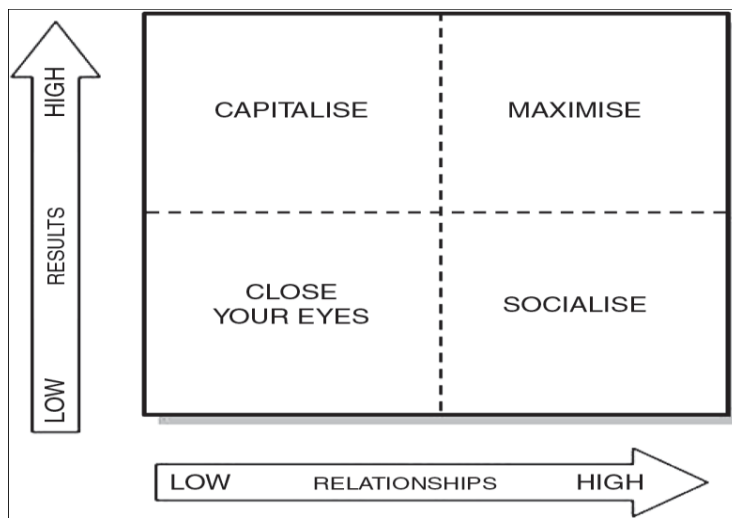


Figure 6 : University – Employer Engagement Matrix. (Covey, 2014:218)

A critique of the Covey model however, results from the fact that the action of ascribing an activity on the quadrant to begin with, requires a subjective decision and therefore, although insightful, this may limit its worthiness beyond the particular contextual setting of a specific event or activity. Nevertheless, the articulation of different types of relationships and 'touch-points' between universities and employers not only encourages further investigation, but also vindicates the need to examine where careers fairs fit into this and to determine if there is any consensus from stakeholders with regard to that positioning.

This review of existing literature has provided the opportunity to consider how career decisions are made and what factors influence this; how students do so prior to making the

transition to the labour market; how universities attempt to support them in this transition; and finally, how employers position and project themselves on campus, in order to influence this process. Furthermore, the process of undertaking this review highlighted the fact that previous work with regard to careers fairs is minimal and what there is, primarily relates to quantitative-based questionnaire data. Therefore, the need for a qualitative study on this subject seems appropriate, desirable and justifiable. My research has attempted to fill this particular gap, both in terms of approach taken and new knowledge generated, and I hope this chapter has given justification to my choice. In the next chapter, I intend to outline my methodology and the rationale that underpinned my decisions to adopt such an approach.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

According to De Janasz and Forret (2008), a student's willingness or ability to establish a meaningful connection with a potential future employer, and then maintain an effective relationship from that point, is a key ingredient of career and professional success. In terms of concentration and scale, the most obvious physical manifestation of this sort of interaction on campus is the university careers fair. These events are physically-bounded, visually-distinct, temporarily constructed social spaces created on campus by universities, yet in terms of what is actually taking place and/or is perceived to take place, there has been very little enquiry (other than participant feedback and evaluation), and little apparent prior scholarship. As illustrated in previous chapters, if you factor in that careers fairs are often endowed with vast resources, dedicated staffing and generous budgets – by universities and employers alike – and that the notion of career success of graduates has never been so significant in the sector (Pavlin and Svetlik, 2014) as it is currently; it would suggest that, as an area of potential research, it would fit the criteria for doctoral study as outlined by the Economic and Social Research Council that states a 'professional doctorate should aim to develop an individual's professional practice and support them in producing a contribution to knowledge' (ESRC 2005: 93). The actual remit of the research itself had to be achievable and plausible and therefore could only ever be an attempt to illuminate and discuss certain aspects of careers fairs within the relatively limited scope of a doctoral thesis - but hopefully this could lead the way for future work in this area.

Purpose of the research

Given that so much is potentially at stake here and so little has been investigated previously, the need to look at university careers fairs holistically and naturalistically would form the central premise of this study. By undertaking this approach, I not only sought to further develop as a reflective practitioner (Scott and Morrison, 2007) to gain a more profound understanding of an area of practice I have been a part of for over two decades, but primarily I wanted to explore aspects around the motivation of participants; their expectations and subsequent interpretation of their experiences; and where these fairs sit in the wider context of career decision-making and the transition from university to employment. I therefore needed to develop research questions that would give me the best possible opportunity to accomplish this within the limited parameters of this study. They needed to be innovative questions so they would generate interesting and significant findings (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011) and they also needed to explore and challenge existing assumptions (Black, 2000). In light of my stated purpose they also needed to be plausible in relation to my aims as, according to Creswell (2009), the pursuit of knowledge in qualitative research is ultimately framed from the outset by the research questions posed and, furthermore, as stated by Silverman (2011), has its direction determined, and its limits sensibly bounded, by the same.

Research Questions

Given the stated purpose of my research, I chose to focus on the following elements as the basis for my research questions – motivation to attend; preparation; participation and

interactions; follow-up activities; meeting stakeholder needs; and finally, what could be done differently.

After a few iterations around these themes, I decided on the following:

1. What rationales do stakeholders give for their participation in university careers fairs and what motivates attendance? (RQ1)
2. What activities and interactions do they engage in while participating in careers fairs? (RQ2)
3. Do career fairs fulfil the expectations of those attending? (RQ3)
4. What changes could be made to better support students' career decision-making and facilitate fairer access to the graduate labour market? (RQ4)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the theoretical lens through which to explore these questions was Careership theory (Hodkinson et al, 1997), which was justified and plausible, particularly given my stated interest in the inter-relational influences of structure and agency; of field and the role of capital; and also to what extent careers fairs perpetuate, or conversely challenge, inequality. I was also keen to link with some contemporary work around Employability Capital (Peeters et al., 2019). Based around overarching themes of human and social capital, the main distinction between these as follows – ‘both are tied to the person, however human capital finds its source in the individual, whereas social capital originates from relationships with others’ (2019: 82). Of the 12 elements developed by Peeters et al, nine relate to human capital around skills, knowledge and attitudes; and three focus on social capital. In relation to careers fairs, the most pertinent elements are found in their ‘employability capital matrix’ and specifically relate to my final research question

around careers fairs as a vehicle to facilitate transition and fairer access. These are - knowledge needed to manage a transition (human capital); attitudes needed to manage a transition (human capital); and the network of contacts that can help manage a transition (social capital).

Establishing a framework

Unlike the natural sciences, and the propensity to employ classical scientific methodology to research, the nature of the questions I sought to answer (listed above) are firmly rooted in the social sciences and would require an interpretivist approach rather than a purely positivist one, particularly as I would find it difficult to meet my research aims and adequately answer my research questions if I attempted to do so through a methodology that produced only quantifiable and objectively verifiable outcomes (Bryman, 2003). As a social scientist, my aims clearly outlined an attempt to understand human nature, opinion and feelings in relation to the subject of my study, rather than understand and acquire knowledge through numerical data. In other words, my approach required a focus on the subjective realities of the research participants (Morrison, 2002), and to find meaning in experience rather than experimentation, in stories rather than statistics.

Rather than test a particular hypothesis or uncover a hitherto hidden truth, this investigation was undertaken using a distinctly qualitative and interpretative approach in order for any outcomes or patterns to emerge from the research activity itself - as it was ultimately 'grounded in people's experience' (Morrison, 2002: 18). I did not seek to evaluate careers fairs in terms of number of attendees or amount of successful recruits, but instead I wanted to determine and interpret the views of the participants' and their expectations,

why they attended and ultimately how they engaged with each other and the space. My perspective was one that saw these actions, interactions and behaviours, and the way people interpret these and act upon them, as critical in understanding the very nature of what is taking place (Basit, 2010) at careers fairs, however I did not simply set out to reflect the meanings of stakeholders in isolation, but to further contextualise and layer these by exploring the inter-relational nature between participants themselves in this study.

By aligning myself within an interpretivist paradigm, I aimed to demonstrate that I am 'concerned not with presenting a distanced, scientific and objective account of the social world, but with an account that recognizes the subjective reality of the experiences of those people who constitute and construct the social world' (Pole and Morrison, 2003: 5). In this respect, as the research aims demand a 'sense-making strategy', then this meaning-inducing qualitative approach appeared to be most appropriate. After all, research should add to the universe of discourse (Basit, 2010) and, as such, be shared and understood by fellow educational researchers and professional peers; not simply exist without context or application. My aim was to generate a description of experiences and viewpoints designed to convey an overall understanding as to what was going on - and, in epistemological terms, what was worth knowing - gathered by observing and experiencing the real-life setting of a careers fair. The choice of methodology and research design would aim, therefore, to produce data that had depth, complexity and roundness rather than mere surface meaning of the kind a positivist approach to this topic might have produced; I sought emerging themes and patterns rather than 'quantification' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 11) and therefore required the appropriate tools to produce such data.

In order to ascertain whether my approach to the methodology was robust enough for the task at hand and had 'epistemological credibility' (Thorne et al, 1997: 170), I also had to acknowledge and challenge my previous suppositions and consider what I think I may have known already (Caelli et al, 2003). My professional background, and current role, means I have spent a lot of time delivering large-scale careers fairs – it is a very familiar space to me. This is not only acknowledged throughout the research but arguably brings additional richness in terms of context, such as a familiarity with the language and look of the space, but also a degree of credibility as a researcher given I have a well-established track-record as both a practitioner and manager in the area of career guidance and employer engagement. My stated aim was to do more than simply reflect the meanings of the various stakeholders – i.e. to contextualise them and seek to understand them – so a failure to draw upon my existing knowledge would have been a missed opportunity to add to the research findings and present something meaningful. Furthermore, it was precisely this existing insight - together with a thorough review of related literature in this field - that led me to determine what questions I needed to ask of this study in order to generate data around perception, expectations and interactions. My aim therefore was to channel my expertise in a way that would enrich the research, giving me the scope to identify and then subsequently explore specific threads and themes that emerged; a decision that was also ultimately best served by pursuing a qualitative approach.

With all research, it is imperative to establish the most appropriate methodological starting point as there is always a danger that any slight misalignment at this stage could be exacerbated as the research progressed. To use the analogy of an archer aiming at a target in the distance - what may be only millimetres off-target at source could be a miss of metres by the time the arrow reaches its intended target. Without a robust methodological

underpinning of my research as an on-going point of reference to inform and steer my decisions around design, methods, and sample, I would not only jeopardise the research aims, and fall short of addressing the research questions, but also fail to identify and understand connections and themes. Ultimately, therefore, preventing any outcomes from being understood in any wider context. This meant a methodology that was agile enough to be a reflection of the questions I sought to answer, rather than twist my methodology to suit an established tradition at the expense of the knowledge I wanted to uncover.

Sandelowski (2000: 334) described this as 'methodological acrobatics' where studies that often blend approaches are sometimes then mislabelled in order to fit a more recognisable description.

If one accepts a qualitative methodology as the best fit for this piece of research, there remained the question as to the most appropriate strategy to adopt from within this tradition. Arguably, this study could be viewed differently depending upon the emphasis one places on the component aspects of the enquiry. To focus on a number of students and their journey through and beyond the careers fair would see this investigation as case study based, especially as a variety of data collection methods could be used to build an in-depth picture (Stake, 1995). It would however, mean that the study was reliant on the continued participation of individuals who - particularly the student subjects - can be transient in terms of sustained interest and consent, and susceptible to shifting priorities in their lives which meant there would be a real danger of losing participants mid data collection. Not insurmountable in terms of overall research aims but it would undoubtedly give the data collection a sense of risk that need not have been taken in the first instance. Alternatively, to focus on the stories of the participants and then combine these with the researcher's observations of the same experiences would have all the hallmarks of a collaborative

narrative approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). However, this would be reliant upon all parties witnessing/experiencing the exact same events, which would be very difficult to ensure, logistically and practically, given both the large-scale nature of these fairs and the fact that this research would not be the main motivation for attendance. As such, that approach would have been both practically problematic and tactically restrictive. Having considered these and other options from the interpretivist tradition, I concluded that, for reasons highlighted below, I would adopt a Thematic analysis (TA) approach to this study, as outlined in the seminal work of Braun and Clarke (2006).

This approach lends itself to uncovering meaning through the ways in which the participants themselves reflect upon and make sense of the world they are experiencing (in this case a careers fair). As Nowell et al contends, ‘thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights’ (2017: 2). In other words, it is the participants interpretation and their perceptions that provide the epistemological core element to the knowledge I seek to uncover. From the very outset of my research, I was keen to explore how individual participants – drawn from the main groups of stakeholders – perceived these events and how they experienced them on a very personal level. A thematic analysis approach seemed to encapsulate these priorities adequately, and enabled me to draw out what Smith (2009) describes as the ‘units of experience’ and in particular, the interconnectivity and links to be found between these units. Rather than seeking to describe careers fairs in a superficial one-dimensional way, my main interest was always to try to engage with the reflections of those who attend and participate in this very particular social space. In other words, to examine in detail how someone makes sense of them, rather than attempt to determine a single orthodox interpretation or fit a preconceived hypothesis. As

Smith asserts, 'human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience' (Smith et al, 2009: 3). By embracing such an idiographic approach, it placed the focus on the sense making undertaken by the participants themselves, which in-turn generated the raw material to be analysed. Braun and Clarke argued that this aspect makes thematic analysis ideal 'for working within a participatory research paradigm, with participants as collaborators' (2006: 97). The data analysis aspect is covered later in this chapter; however it is useful to note that thematic analysis provides the flexibility to take an initially linear approach to looking at significant amounts of qualitative data and then progress meaningfully to 'an iterative and reflective process that develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between phases' (Nowell et al, 2017: 4).

In conclusion, by adopting this approach the methodology would be robust, the methods would be justified - and both would therefore stand up to scrutiny as the nature of the study had determined the methodology and not vice versa. In addition, the overarching framework was unequivocally conceptually informed, qualitative and thematic. Finally, it enabled my research to achieve its stated objective to move from the descriptive, towards concepts and theories (Pole and Morrison, 2003) thereby going beyond the setting and location.

Data collection tools

Given that one of the main aims of this study was to determine what participants perceived to be their experiences of careers fairs, I needed an appropriate means of capturing this in a way that allowed their individual interpretation to come to the fore. I was also interested in

how these perceptions then affected their behaviour and approach, and how they then understood their experience in relation to their expectations and subsequent interpretation of what took place. As such, my decision to use interviews as a tool for collecting qualitative data was, as Arksey and Knight (1999: 2) contend, due to its suitability for generating 'data on understandings, opinions, what people remember doing, attitudes and feelings that people have'.

In addition, my research questions and subsequent choice of paradigm, predicated the need to experience and explore the social space at the very centre of my enquiry – the careers fair. Furthermore, observations would give me the opportunity to determine the extent to which stakeholders do what they told me they do in interviews and to see if they do other things as well or instead of (Foster, 1996). In particular, with regards to the interviews undertaken with students and employers prior to the careers fairs, I used their responses to inform and frame elements of my fieldwork plan when subsequently carrying out observations at the fairs. Although my observation approach was unstructured, I nevertheless wanted to use the data generated from these interviews to firstly determine whether the behaviour and interactions I observed were congruent with the anticipated outlook of those yet to attend; and secondly, to give myself a number of cues to look out for in the melee that are busy careers fairs.

This is where I felt that this particular combination – semi-structured interviews and observations – would provide an even more robust data set than simply choosing one or the other and then attempting to extrapolate an understanding of what was taking place.

Semi-structured interviews

In order to explore and probe expectations and interpretations, as well as to pursue emerging themes and threads, I chose to use semi-structured interviews as a key method of data collection. It was important that data be generated via a method that allowed participants to offer their own interpretation and evaluate their own experiences. Semi-structured interviews are the most common method for gathering data for qualitative research (Bryman, 2003) and are an integral part of most social science research traditions. Having decided to place a focus on situated meaning and subsequent contextualised experience, my study required an approach that reflected certain themes but remained flexible enough to avoid inhibiting or restricting the participant's responses and thereby enabling issues to come to the fore (Carspecken, 1996), allowing scope to probe and explore particular aspects. My aim was to capture interview data that displayed what Oppenheim (1992) described as 'canons of validity' such as honesty, depth of response and richness. The emerging themes from the initial round of interviews informed further choices relating to aspects pursued in subsequent observations and follow-up interviews. However, to use interviews in my research I had to recognise the potential limitations. Firstly they are framed by my choices as a researcher in respect of what is asked and where they are conducted; and secondly, some participants may feel some wariness in an interview setting or may feel, for example, that their responses might find a wider audience and hinder their chances of securing opportunities with particular employers. I had to be sensitive to this and provide reassurance regarding confidentiality, anonymity and the freedom to choose not to answer particular questions. My primary aim was to ensure I provided this reassurance from the outset and regularly throughout.

The choice to interview stakeholders was an appropriate one given the nature of the study and the need to unpick potentially complex and nuanced issues. In order to attempt to answer my research questions, I needed to design my data collection in a way that enabled me to gain an insight into people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences. Interviews certainly facilitate this, but potentially much more too. As Schostack (2006) contends with his notion of the 'Inter-view'... 'It is a place where views may clash, deceive, seduce, enchant ... it is as much about seeing the world – mine, yours, ours, theirs – as about hearing accounts, opinions, arguments' (2006: 1). In essence, much more than simply a tool to gather information, it goes beyond the superficiality of a two-way conversation and becomes a place where imagination, empathy and visualisation creates something multi-dimensional. By guiding the conversation rather than determining it, I intended to embrace a semi-structured approach that allowed me to test and to probe these in detail. My pre-set questions were developed with explicit alignment to the research questions and were an attempt to cover certain ground in each interview; but were also designed to allow a movement from a general overview to something more specific and personal for the interviewee. They needed to also establish, in the initial stages of the interview, any background information or awareness, and then gradually probe deeper as the interview progressed in order to generate arguably richer more in-depth data. My aim was to be able to follow discussion points and ideas whilst remaining within reach of the structured point of reference my open pre-set questions provided. I wanted to instil a degree of flexibility that would enable the interviewee to feel comfortable in speaking more widely about issues, concerns and beliefs, and that elaboration was not only permissible but also encouraged. If appropriate, I also introduced additional questions in order to probe deeper or elicit further data dependent on the interviewee's responses. I was fully prepared to

intersperse each interview with a whole series of supplementary questions. These were designed to fulfil a variety of roles, such as - to clarify or verify previous responses; to prompt if the interviewee seemed taciturn or seemingly unable to elaborate; to probe certain aspects of potential interest; and not least to follow-up certain threads introduced by the subject themselves but from my perspective, worthy of further investigation.

It was critical from the outset that my role in the interview - and the responsibilities this carries with it - were acknowledged and addressed. I required a level of awareness and preparedness that went way beyond merely having a list of pre-set questions. The interviewee needed to feel that the environment of the interview itself was one that was conducive to opening up and they needed to have confidence in everything they experienced - with me, as the researcher; the surroundings; the guarantees of confidentiality; and the authenticity of the process. I had to ensure that I not only listened carefully but that being a good listener was communicated to the interviewee through my body language (Rubin and Rubin, 2011) and I needed to find the correct balance between summarising and checking understanding without leading the interviewee or talking too much. To fulfil this role, communication skills are key. It is through the effective and appropriate use of these communication skills that the process is actually brought to life. Perhaps the most pre-eminent of these is that of 'active listening' whereby, rather than listening in order to find an answer, the researcher is listening to everything, including feeling and emotion, in order to understand the interviewee's experience. This creates the right kind of environment for this relationship to work at its best and, through paraphrasing, summarising and demonstrating understanding, you can avoid the dead-end of closed questions and allow the interview to move forward.

As a careers fair at such a critical time in a student's university experience is perhaps perceived as offering great potential for career advancement, it also requires a high degree of transparency and trust. This is key to the process, particularly where there is the potential for the interviewee to view the relationship as one based on inequity in relation to the power and/or status. These considerations safeguard the interests and well-being of both parties; at the same time enhancing the experience and the potential benefits to be gained. Perhaps the main element that underpins this is a commitment to confidentiality, and this needs to form the basis of an initial agreement at the contracting stage that defines the parameters of the relationship. As well as listening, the interviewer must also take note, and in some cases make use of, body language and gestures that the interviewee introduces. These can be outward signs of boredom or anxiety for example, requiring the interviewer to respond or adapt in some way. They can however, also be a way of communicating a non-verbal message such as emphasis, cynicism, hopefulness, resignation and so on. It is key for a researcher utilising interviews for data collection to be cognisant of these and to attempt to capture the essence of what is being conveyed at a conscious and sub-conscious level.

By interviewing the key stakeholders involved in careers fairs, I hoped to gauge their thoughts and feelings about these events and, in particular, their expectations beforehand and their reflections afterwards. As anticipated by Kvale (1996), interviewing did indeed result in instances where facts were uncovered, but the use of interviewing in these circumstances was primarily designed in order to gain a greater understanding of people's perceptions and views, rather than grasp any 'facts'. Overall, it became clear that interviewing the various stakeholders was appropriate in terms of addressing my research questions and in providing me with a chance to fulfil my research aims. The key was to contract well at the beginning, including dealing with issues such as confidentiality and

consent; to establish trust and rapport between myself and the interview subjects; and finally, through the use of appropriate questions, to allow the conversation to enrich and add substance to the data.

Observations

If qualitative research contains a methodological imperative to create a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) then observations in the field (or 'fieldwork') can be seen as a very useful means to this end. Researchers seek to examine situations, cultures, societies, in order that they may reveal a certain understanding of what is taking place and, in particular, to illuminate how the participants themselves understand these settings. Fieldwork provides an opportunity to spend time in these settings, to immerse oneself into the environment, and to develop a level of awareness and consciousness that allows the generation of lots of data, often driven by an underlying fear of missing something (Nilan, 2002). It is even more nuanced than that, as it goes behind the superficiality of what might initially present itself and requires an exploration of identity, reflexivity and positionality, as well as acknowledging spheres of influence such as gender and power; structure and agency.

The use of observations as a research method does not necessarily define a specific qualitative approach (such as ethnography) – no more than the use of any other qualitative method, or combination thereof, would do. However, it is true that my methodological choice to align my approach in the way I have outlined previously meant observation did play a key role in generating data. As the individual would be my primary unit of analysis, fieldwork observations would play a secondary role to the interviews; however, this would provide much needed context to the data and subsequent analysis. The part observations

would play required a commitment on my part to embrace this choice of method wholeheartedly. This willingness to immerse myself into the setting and display a level of personal involvement in order to achieve understanding was key, as ‘the essence of fieldwork is often revealed in the intent behind it rather than the label itself’ (Wolcott, 1: 66). Many researchers, Brewer (2000) argues, may utilise field-research techniques as a tool for their research - to fulfil a need or to complement other methods - but fieldwork, in this all-encompassing sense, involves a personal commitment to the space and the interactions under observation. Wolcott goes on to describe this as making an ‘intimate acquaintance’ (1995: 60) with the field, which may sound needlessly graphic but is in essence introducing the concept of emotion to fieldwork: rather than a distraction or a possible sign of weakness to be avoided, this was something I wanted to harness.

Educational spaces, such as careers fair, are ‘not just accidents of geography, or inert containers of social life: they are created and nurtured by people, including researchers’ (Mills and Morton, 2013: 60) and as such the choices we make in defining our field are fundamental to the nature of the research itself. Places, spaces and people are all interconnected and a failure to maintain an awareness of this would diminish any possible hope of understanding what is happening. By observing students and employers in this setting, one can build a picture – by identifying behaviour, patterns, verbal and non-verbal interactions and so on - of how they construct their own realities in a way that alternative methods of data collection might overlook. As Mulhall (2002: 307) contends, ‘the way people move, dress, interact and use space is very much a part of how particular social settings are constructed’. It is key to developing a holistic understanding of what is taking place, and furthermore can help understand how or why something occurs. Not only in relation to the interaction between research subjects (in this case students and employers)

but also in a wider sense, such as the relative influence of the physical environment and the time spent by people doing particular things.

A failure to appreciate the impact of my choices in framing a field of study would also render any data generated as meaningless (Mills and Morton, 2013); as Madden (2010: 38) explains, field researchers are 'place makers' ... fieldwork turns someone's 'everyday place into another very particular sort of place.' The extent of choice in relation to sites for study can, in some cases, be overplayed due to the fact that some settings are clearly self-evident for practical reasons (Walford, 2008) e.g. a classroom or, in the case of this research, a careers fair. My main consideration revolved around additional factors such as potential for access and geographical logistics.

The nature of fieldwork is one that evokes a myriad of interconnecting relationships. As such, fieldwork, from the researcher's perspective, can never be a clinically sanitised process of detached observation (Emerson et al. 2011); on the contrary, it requires the researcher to step into a world ... so long as he/she remains cognisant of this element throughout. Once thought-provokingly described as 'deep hanging out' (Geertz, 1973), observational fieldwork requires a level of personal and emotional investment from the researcher that has to be addressed in order for the research to have validity. My decision to pursue a primarily passive participant role within the fieldwork was taken on the basis that this would provide me with the greatest opportunity to see, hear, understand and document what was happening, whilst at the same time minimising the chance that my presence would influence or impact upon the naturalistic nature of the setting. To connect with the field, and the social actors therein, I needed to display a level of empathy and an investment in the setting (Madden, 2010) but not to the extent that one sacrifices self-

awareness or the ability to be critical; arguably there lies the path towards relativism and the risk of losing one's objectivity as a researcher. In essence, 'the challenge is to become part of a foreign milieu, to submit to the outside, to get drowned in and carried away by it, while staying alert to the gradual emergence of a theme to which chance encounters, fugitive events, anecdotal observations give rise' (Rabinow et al. 2008: 116).

Key to utilising the potential of observation as an effective research tool is the need to determine where and when to look (Delamont, 2002: 115). This decision needs to be systematic and well thought through and required me to utilise my familiarity with the field to determine the best possible scenario for gathering data. In relation to my own choices - in line with my research questions - I decided that I would observe two careers fairs that each had elements in common that would enable me to identify similarities or differences in a relatively comparable way. These two also retained a number of distinct features about them that gave the possibility of new insight and new themes to explore. I wanted to focus particularly on several elements that would help me uncover the knowledge needed to answer my research questions, but these aspects only ever constituted a proportion of my plan, so I did not run the risk of only focussing on certain observations at the expense of others. This type of approach has been previously outlined by Creswell (2009) - namely a focus on the physical setting, the participants, the activities, and the interactions; and not least, what Creswell described as the 'subtle factors', i.e. those non-verbal and/or seemingly peripheral elements that may or may not add subsequent meaning to the study in relation to my research questions.

To observe these two careers fairs in situ was a decision designed to place an 'emphasis on depth, complexity and roundness in data rather than surface analysis of broad patterns'

(Basit, 2010: 122), and based on my contention that this particular kind of data could not be sourced solely via any other research method. A study of careers fairs - in particular, one with a stated aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the extent to which careers fairs facilitate the graduate labour market – certainly lent itself to observational fieldwork. Not least as it offered the opportunity to firstly determine some benchmarks i.e. how many students attend, which recruiters exhibit, how are they structured/timed, what publicity is produced and so on. Secondly, how do people interact, what conversations take place, what specific issues are discussed, what questions are asked, how do organisers encourage engagement and measure impact. Finally, it provided a chance to consider body language, individual/group dynamics, enticements and incentives, non-verbal and sensory data, projection of messages, and possible multi-layered dimensions to interactions. It is this final element that makes field observation particularly well-suited to a study on careers fairs as it allows direct observation of these elements in situ and as they happen.

The sheer scale of these events meant that I, as the researcher, could undertake data collection without altering the dynamics of the interactions or the nature of the event itself, as my presence, and therefore my motives, could pass unnoticed. This gave me a great deal of confidence that the interactions and behaviours I witnessed were exactly as they would have been had I not been there, untainted by my presence and actions. I remained however, completely conscious of the fact that I was active within the field throughout and did not take my covertness for granted. In fact, in order to conduct some informal impromptu conversations with both students and employers, I declared my role to them and sought verbal consent prior to asking for their thoughts and views as to their experience of the event. The decision to initiate these seemingly causal conversations with participants was a necessary and permissible aspect of this particular fieldwork for two main reasons.

Firstly, it would help me develop a richer picture as to how stakeholders perceive the event, and all its many facets, 'in real time', and secondly, it would also help inform my decision making with regards to the semi-structured interview questions I would develop for my post-fair interviewing phase. It is a tactic widely expected, and often recommended, when there is little or no prior literature to draw upon specifically about the research environment under observation (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013: 360) – as is the case with university careers fairs (see Literature Review chapter).

This approach did allow scope for some triangulation of the data to provide a more rounded whole picture of not only what happens at these fairs but also how different protagonists anticipate and subsequently reflect upon them.

Observation captures the whole social setting in which people function ... the analogy of a jigsaw is useful here. Interviews with individuals provide the pieces of the jigsaw and these pieces are fitted into the 'picture on the box' which is gained through observation.

(Mulhall 2002: 308)

By committing to a deep involvement in the setting, I hoped to ensure that my approach had meaning, not only in relation to my methodological decision to adopt an interpretive stance, but also providing a clear link back to my initial ontological and epistemological positioning. Namely, that the knowledge I seek to uncover is one that is not external to the social actors in the careers fair setting, on the contrary it only exists because of their behaviours, interactions and perceptions. This social world – in this instance a university careers fair - can only be known by experiencing the setting itself and exposing yourself to it

in its entirety. To generate data to address the research questions I sought to answer – fieldwork observations needed to be an integral part of my approach.

Research population

One option was to consider tracking specific students from initial awareness of careers fairs; through to preparation; attendance; engagement with recruiters; application and selection process etc. However, after much consideration, this proved to have little viability, for primarily logistical reasons, in keeping the research subject population intact over time. My experience of these events, and of the changing priorities of final year students, meant that it would be difficult to achieve practically as part of an EdD study. There would be a clear risk of losing study subjects at every stage of the process, especially as I was unwilling, and unable, to introduce elements such as incentivising participation, financially or otherwise. Besides, linking back to the questions I sought to answer, they did not predicate a need for a longitudinal tracking type approach - to gauge the rationale behind a decision to attend, determining preparation, actual behaviour at the event, follow-up activities and finally reflection – none of these questions require the same individual to be tracked through the process. These questions could be answered instead by taking a sample of student views and interpretations before a careers fair; asking similar questions of a different set of students at an event; and then finally asking a small number of attendees to reflect on the event and their subsequent activities since (if any) a couple of months after the fair. There are many reasons why I considered this approach plausible, and perhaps the primary one took me directly back to my research aims. To address these, it was perfectly justifiable to

draw from a range of student and employer subjects; gauge their views and interpretations, and then contextualise these within the framework of the study, including the fieldwork, and, not least, my insider knowledge – all combining to form part of the ‘sense-making strategy’ (Scott and Morrison, 2007: 161) I sought.

Sample

Decisions around sampling - in particular how and why a sample of research subjects are sourced – are inextricably linked to the potential quality of data that might emerge from the investigation. As such, these decisions have to be underpinned by a robust rationale and be able to withstand appropriate scrutiny at the start, during and after the research phase. As it is impossible to research the views of all participants at careers fairs, in a qualitative sense, it was necessary to find ‘a smaller group which is usually, though not always, a representative of the wider population’ (Oppenheim, 1992: 38). One of the main challenges faced with this particular investigation is that I did not have equal access to each participant in the population (Basil, 2010: 50), therefore the option of probability sampling had to be discounted at an early stage. It was clear that in the case of this particular investigation - and in keeping with many small-scale studies adopting an interpretive paradigm – my sample would only ever represent itself, rather than the wider population. Having said that, I was very keen to ensure my sample reflected certain characteristics of what I understood to be the wider population attending careers fairs, and made specific decisions to ensure that any sample reflected these as best they could. For example, with student interviewees (both pre and post fair) I wanted a gender mix, and a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate. If possible, I also wanted to reflect a variety of subject disciplines and utilise

any contextual or background information available to offer up the potential of a deeper understanding of their experience and perceptions, if available and appropriate. This included a mix of HE entry qualifications – A' level route, as well as vocational FE courses – and also to reflect those who had moved away from home to study as well as locally-based 'commuter students'. Interesting work has been undertaken recently on the changing migration patterns of undergraduates in relation to choice of location study and subsequent geographical decisions upon entering the labour market after university (Ball, 2015), this had the potential of highlighting influencing factors, such as location and mobility, may have on career thinking and decision-making.

For employer interviewees, practical access and availability would ultimately be a key consideration, especially given the busy workload and intense target-driven model adopted by the graduate recruitment sector. From the outset, I had to acknowledge that my research - although a topic of interest to many employers - would not instantly be seen as aligning with the pressures placed upon recruiters to justify their time in relation to their very demanding hire plans. However, many recruiters are increasingly keen to explore a more multi-layered relationship with universities, beyond the immediate recruitment cycle, and by positioning my research accordingly, I was able to source research subjects from this stakeholder group. A desirable aim was to have a mix of sectors as I felt this would provide a more accurate reflection of the graduate labour market faced by UK students progressing into the work place after university. Size of employer would prove more difficult as larger companies are disproportionately represented at careers fairs.

On consideration of all the possible opportunities available to me to source a sample, and having assessed not just the relative merits but also the logistical considerations, I decided

that, realistically, I had to acquire my research subjects through a process of convenience sampling in the first instance, followed by some additional snowball sampling. To qualify this decision – as discussed elsewhere in this thesis - I was aware from the outset that the focus of my research had to take place away from my own university and my substantive job role, therefore I needed to negotiate access to the careers fairs and students in other universities.

As outlined earlier, the primary unit of analysis in my study was the individual and the primary data collection tool was a series of semi-structured interviews. Listed below for the first time are the subjects of the study and, for the purposes of clarity and consistency throughout the next chapter, these participants are referenced as follows:

Students interviewed PRIOR to attending a careers fair –

Grace PreS-01: Female. UK. White. Russell Group University. Humanities student.

One parent attended university.

Solamita PreS-02: Female. Romania. White. Post-92 University. Business student.

First generation.

Nick PreS-03: Male. UK. White. Post-92 University. Psychology student. First

generation.

Janelle PreS-04: Female. Chinese. Russell Group University. International Business student. First generation.

Emma PreS-05: Female. UK. White. Post-92 University. Arts graduate. Parents attended university.

Employers –

Katie Emp-01: Female. UK. White. Recruiter for large UK multi-national.

Elena Emp-02: Female. Malta. White. Recruiter for UK regional consortium.

Sarah Emp-03: Female. UK. White. Recruiter for US-based multi-national.

Careers Service staff –

Liz CS-01: Female. White. UK. Careers Fair organiser. Russell Group University.

Amy CS-02: Female. White. UK. Careers Fair organiser. Non-aligned University.

Diane CS-03: Female. White. UK. Careers Fair organiser. Post-92 University.

Students interviewed FOLLOWING attending a careers fair –

Lewis PostS-01: Male. White. UK. Post-92 University. IT student. First generation.

Obi PostS-02: Female. Nigeria. Post-92 University. Food and Nutrition student. First generation.

Iqra PostS-03: Female. BAME. UK. Post-92 University. Logistics and Supply Chain. First generation.

Aneekah PostS-04: Female. BAME. UK. Russell Group University. Science student. First generation.

Ryan PostS-05: Male. White. UK. Post-92 University. Post Graduate Arts student. One parent attended university.

In keeping with my methodological rationale, a number of observations at careers fairs were carried out at two universities - one Russell Group, one University Alliance. This was designed to provide contextual first-hand data and where referenced in the following chapter, these observations are clearly labelled.

Pilot

The questions used in the interviews needed to be designed in such a way that they were clear and comprehensible from the interviewee's perspective; as such, I tried them out on our Student Associates - recruited by the careers service, to promote our JobShop across campus and manage our social media. My aim was to use the pilot to draw out information and insight I thought might be needed to create this holistic perspective of careers fairs. They had to be robust enough to draw out the participants own experiences and constructs of what, how and why they viewed these events in the way that they did – or in the case of the pre-fair interviews, how they anticipated the experience to be. The right choice of questions therefore were absolutely key to achieving this and I had to ensure that they were best-placed to elicit the interviewees perceived (or planned) behaviour; their opinions attitudes and values; their feelings and anxieties; and their pre-existing knowledge, be that informed or otherwise (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Ethical considerations

All aspects of this research, and any decision-making involved, was framed by the principles and guidelines laid down by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) which states that 'all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for the person; knowledge; democratic values; the quality of educational research; and academic freedom' (BERA 2011: 4).

Implicit in this piece of research was the acknowledgement that that the students in the study had already actively chosen to engage with the careers fair, thereby precluding those students who are not aware of these events or have proactively chosen not to attend them. These two groups of students could actually form the focus of future research, particularly to try to understand their lack of awareness and/or reasons behind their choice not to attend. However, for the purposes of this study, although it created sample bias, there should be no direct impact upon my research beyond an awareness and acknowledgement that this bias exists; and that findings should not seek to attempt to incorporate the opinion, feelings and actions of this particular group.

As my study took me into the space that formed the subject of my research, consideration of the potential impact this created was at the forefront of my mind at all times. My aim was to make clear, from the outset, the purpose, scope and implications of my research, to all participants, via a brief summary for them to keep as a point of reference. I also supplied my direct contact details in case there were any issues arising or further clarification was sought. To further mitigate additional issues that may have arisen from having an existing profile in this sector, I felt that by shifting the location of my study to the North West region, gave me additional distance between my substantive job role and my role as a researcher.

I sought to ensure that consent was transparent, informed and ongoing throughout the research. Participants for the semi-structured interviews were invited to take part and had the option to withdraw at any point during the research itself. The purpose, process and potential legacy and dissemination of the research was explained fully, whilst initial consent was sought; and was reiterated before any subsequent interaction. Participants were also encouraged to seek clarification should they wish, at any point.

Reassurances were explicitly given in regard to the anonymity of participants, and the subsequent handling of any data collected because of the research process. During transcription, all identifiable individual characteristics were neutralised to ensure anonymity from that point. This complies with not only BERA guidelines 25 – 28 but also with the Data Protection Act (1998) and the Data Protection Act (2018) which brought into effect the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The data was stored securely and not made available for other purposes, including any related research. Whilst individual participant privacy was assured, maintaining absolute anonymity for institutions involved remained a mitigated risk throughout and one that cannot be completely eradicated given the small numbers of universities involved. In essence, the way the research is presented may offer up certain features that through assumption and educated guesswork could make these universities identifiable. By acknowledging this from the outset, I have striven to ensure that wherever possible my research does not contain these unintentional, yet still distinguishable, features.

Reflexivity

By the very nature of the methodological choices made, I was inescapably part of the world I was researching - a role permissible in interpretative research tradition, so long as it is clearly addressed and unequivocally acknowledged throughout. Given my professional background working in career services - and in particular my prior experiences of careers fairs stretching back almost 20 years - it was essential that this was embraced in an appropriate and meaningful way as a potential useful source of background knowledge and insight. To in any way attempt to leave this aspect unaddressed or hidden, would have the potential to taint any findings and endanger the authenticity of the research itself.

Qualitative research is not a neutral activity and seeks to interpret what is arguably a world already interpreted by the participants themselves; the researcher is in this world and of this world and should therefore seek to understand their part within it and the influence exerted upon it. Guba and Lincoln describe this role as the 'human instrument' (1985: 187) in the research, and this element of reflexivity, rather than undermining my choice of methodology, could in fact introduce positive aspects to the study. This had the potential make my reactions more responsive and adaptable; enable me to probe and challenge potential anomalies and/or atypical behaviours; and ultimately anchor my research within a context of a pre-existing bigger picture. Being a committed researcher seeking new knowledge from a familiar setting, does not mean I am a disinterested observer – and any attempt to claim a separation between the research and myself would be neither possible in these circumstances, nor truthful.

Data analysis

Analysis of data begins very early in the research process, in fact it is a feature of every stage from decision-making prior to the collection of data onwards (Lampard and Pole, 2015). For instance, the testing and piloting of data collection tools requires an analysis of their relative efficacy in relation to addressing research questions; also, the ongoing exploration of existing literature, in relation to these research questions, becomes increasingly framed by data analysis considerations. The approach a researcher adopts to data analysis is both a practical tool to help manage lots of data, as well as an analytical tool to help make sense of it, involving 'synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorisation, hypothesising, comparison, and pattern finding' (Hatch, 2002:148). This analytical framework, created by the researcher, ensures there is an underpinning robustness and plausibility to any findings and enables themes to emerge, unforced, from the data throughout the process (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

My initial aim was to consider the very wide range of data analysis approaches on offer to qualitative researchers, and then determine which one (or combination) was most appropriate, partly given my now close familiarity with the subject, but primarily in relation to my methodological decisions, highlighted earlier in this chapter. My aim was to break the data down and firstly identify, then subsequently analyse, any emerging groups or patterns in a systematic and meaningful way, adhering to the inductive nature of my enquiry and bringing together all component parts of my research project. My approach to data analysis had to be congruent with and contextualised within, my research, and should not appear random or arbitrary when such decisions were placed under scrutiny by others. With this in mind, my decision was to analyse the interview data using the method of thematic analysis

and 'the aim of the interview would be to recall the parts and their connections to discover this common meaning' (Smith et al, 2009: 2), therefore faithful to my stated research aims and methodological decisions. This commitment to idiography did present a challenge as a researcher during the analysis phase, as I sought to move from the stated views and thoughts of each individual participant, to developing emergent themes and identifying potential connections and commonality of experience. Noon (2018) describes this as an 'uncomfortable dualism' for the researcher, but one that is overcome by a process of data analysis – as outlined below – that is 'fluid, iterative and multi-directional' (2018: 77). The researcher can fully engage in interpretative analysis, whilst remaining faithful to the accounts of the participants themselves and ensuring they remain the focal point of this analysis. The appropriateness of this approach to data handling and analysis, was predicated on the need to acknowledge my role, as the researcher, in relation to the participants' views and responses; in particular when initially deconstructing the transcribed text. Decision-making I undertook, regarding the selection and description of codes, categorising patterns, and ultimately analysing themes, involved an added layer of interpretation by myself, innate in the very choices I made. This does not render my chosen approach unworkable or inappropriate, on the contrary, Smith argues that this provides a useful additional dimension, so long as this reflexive angle is acknowledged and considered throughout.

As mentioned previously, I undertook a staged process to the analysis – in keeping with the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2016) - that began with full immersion back into the original interview data. By revisiting and familiarising myself with these, both the typed transcripts and the audio recordings, I began to annotate the text with initial thoughts and analysis. These notes were based solely on the verbatim comments of the participants, and I was not consciously seeking out patterns at this stage or trying to

find elements that, for example, reaffirmed my own, or others, experiences of these events. Once I had made extensive open annotations of a particular interview, I went back over these to document any emerging themes. The focus remained grounded in the personal narrative and voice of the participants, but this next stage enabled me to group certain threads and to develop particular phrases/headings under which a number of potentially linked data might sit. The next phase of the process was to look back on these headings and determine if there were possible connections between the emerging themes. This was in terms of conceptual understanding; significance or apparent pre-eminence ascribed by the participant to one theme over another; contradictions or affirmations; possible emerging clusters; as well as how these themes linked back to my original research questions, if at all. I also began the process of assessing the depth of evidence offered up by the participant – some assertions in the text, subsequently linked to emerging themes by this process, were clearly robustly held views, others less so. It was imperative that this particular nuance was factored into the analysis, in order to do justice to the original testimonies of the participants. This list of themes - together with a tentative view on the relative hierarchy now ascribed to each theme – provided what Denovan and Macaskill (2012) described as a composite portrayal of experience. This would now include a superordinate theme, together with the relevant sub-theme/s, and appropriate verbatim quotes extracted from the data, thereby allowing researcher and reader alike the ability to track the analytical journey undertaken. The next phase was to repeat this exercise for each interview, taking great care at this stage to avoid rolling previous analysis or themes from one interview to the next, so that each account could be considered ‘on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality’ (Smith et al, 20009: 100). This is of course aspirational as it would be impossible for each case to be completely sanitised of prior analysis, unless each was being

undertaken in isolation by a different researcher. It was however sufficient as a best endeavour, providing I remained fully cognisant of it throughout. The systematic process outlined above – repeated each time – allowed new themes to emerge from each interview analysed, and only when completed did the process shift to looking for patterns across the different cases.

This next stage analysis was not about diluting individual unique or idiosyncratic views; on the contrary, it was about illustrating these, but also at the same time recognising any shared or contradictory perspectives between interview subjects. This enabled me to transcend the linear case-based analysis and group next level themes, in table format, that emerged across the data. Having already moved from the particular to the holistic, the next stage was to move back into the data the opposite way.

This part of the analysis process has been described as moving on from the hermeneutics of empathy to the hermeneutics of suspicion (Smith et al, 2009). I maintained absolute focus on the original text itself but returned to many aspects of it with a more probing and questioning approach, bringing a level of interpretation that challenges the superficial and looks for metaphor, social comparison, indicators of confidence and self-reflection. This rich, multi-layered and often multi-directional process of analysis enabled me to get the most from my data in a way that continued throughout to feel both methodologically justified and faithful to the participants' contributions.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

In keeping with a thematic analysis approach, the following chapter will centre on verbatim extracts from the data in order to give an accurate account of what has been said and in what context; an account that is 'comprehensive, systematic and persuasive' (Smith et al, 2009: 109). Some of these extracts may appear to be lengthy but this is a feature of the analysis and is designed to offer up a detailed evidentiary base that is transparent for the reader and does justice to the data. Intertwined will be the analysis required to interpret this data in line with my conceptual framework. As Smith (2009: 110) also contends, 'this represents a dialogue between the participant and the researcher and that is reflected in the interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts.'

Themes

As discussed in the *Data analysis* section of the previous chapter, the analytical framework was based on identifying and documenting a number of emergent themes. The start of this process was immersion in the data and beginning the process of, tentatively at first, grouping particular common threads as they appeared. After revisiting the transcripts many times over, and refining annotations and thoughts on these emergent themes, it became possible to cluster the data into a number of groups. Field notes and jottings from my observations of careers fairs were also factored in at this stage to provide a sense of contextualisation and in order to consider the possible robustness of a particular theme. If the emergent aspect also resonated in terms of the observations *in situ* then, although not a deciding factor either way, it did provide an indication as to its potential use. Upon developing an even closer familiarity with these themes, identifiable markers became

apparent. This included determining what constituted commonality within groups as well as the extent of nuance that could exist whilst maintaining a position within a group. Some elements evolved into separate themes; others gained greater traction within the data; whilst others lost prominence and became more peripheral. No theme was unjustly promoted nor dismissed; the process was driven, and ultimately determined, by the data itself, allowing for themes which were plausible and justifiable. The following table outlines the themes and sub-themes:

NB - order and the descriptive terms used vary slightly from the sub-headings in this chapter

SUPERORDINATE THEMES	SUBORDINATE THEMES
MOTIVATION	Recruitment
	Opportunity awareness
	Career options
	Brand awareness
	Location & venue
	Configuration
	Choice / decision-making
INTERACTION	Engagement
	Behaviours
	Presentation
	First impressions
	Differentiation
	Diversity
	Representation
REFLECTION	Subsequent actions
	Rumination/consideration

Motivation

Careers fairs are undoubtedly enjoying a sustained uplift in terms of scale, profile, frequency and participation on our campuses. Over 95% of university careers services asserted that careers fair activity in their university had either remained the same or increased on the previous year (AGCAS, 2016), with many regarding the careers fair as being the main focus of student-employer interactions on campus. In accordance with my first research question – *What rationales do stakeholders give for their participation in university careers fairs, what motivates attendance and how do they prepare for them?* – the analysis presented in this section relates to motivation, expectation and preparation, with particular reference to what participants perceive to be the potential gains from attending.

Recruitment

The scope of this study seeks to answer the question as to what rationale do prospective attendees give for deciding to engage and what has motivated this decision. Furthermore, this is not simply an exercise in reporting their views on this; rather the analysis will be based on the interpretation of what they subsequently offer up as a rationale. The traditional assumption is that students attend careers fairs for the purpose of recruitment. This is often held up by universities themselves in publicity materials and to justify the expense in running such events in the first place; namely, that they facilitate a transactional interface on campus between those who are seeking new talent (employers) and the available talent themselves (final year students / recent graduates). In other words, the purpose is recruitment and the tool is the careers fair. Although the data offered up from the various stakeholders did touch upon this fleetingly, it was by no means offered up by

any interviewee as a primary reason for participating, or motivational factor in attending; in fact, it was noteworthy for its relative absence in the data. Of each of the stakeholders groups interviewed, only the employers referenced the potential opportunity to recruit, or at least start the recruitment process. One recruiter, Katie, who represents the UK recruitment function of a large US multi-national, introduced three differing notions of campus-based recruitment in one extract:

“I’d say mainly for what we call active recruitment, as opposed to direct recruitment. Ultimately, the aim is to get people to make some initial applications with us or at least sign-up. So I think it’s quite important for active recruiting, rather than other activities we do on campus where you may work on brand awareness and things.”

(Katie Emp-01)

In this particular interview, the notion of ‘active recruitment’ was introduced by the interviewee, primarily to distinguish purposeful attempts to attract and recruit students – ‘direct recruitment’ – Examples of direct recruitment for an employer would include direct applications to employers; speculative CV approaches; web-based queries; and graduate offers to former placement students. The third notion implicitly introduced in the final sentence is soft recruitment (although this phrase was never used explicitly by Katie). These are activities designed to create a profile on campus, without the explicit call to action usually associated with a recruitment event or hiring campaign.

Overall, the insight offered up by each employer participant in this study did show that recruitment was not a prime motivator, and there was a tangible degree of cynicism for this reason as a rationale for attending. In Sarah’s view, below, there are important reasons to

attend that link strongly to her hire plan and business growth strategies; but direct recruitment would appear at best a peripheral consideration:

“I think to hope for much more, certainly the Careers Fairs that happen in the autumn term, to hope for much more is just pie in the sky really. So we always take some, a data capture app with us, follow it up with the students afterwards and maybe meet them for a coffee on campus, or do a networking event afterwards, or something, just to kind of try and layer that Careers Fair, because as I say, I think. If you just turned up at a Careers Fair and kept your fingers crossed that you’d get an employee out of it, you just wouldn’t”

(Sarah Emp-03)

The message from both Sarah and Katie was that they saw their attendance at careers fairs as the start of a process rather than the process in its entirety - a means to an end rather than the end itself. One element that stands out in the extract above is that Sarah uses the careers fair as a basis to build upon. The description implied that she subsequently layers the careers fair with further recruitment activities designed to reinforce and strengthen the bond between recruiter and potential applicant, akin to Porter et al (2004) and their notion of critical contact. The recruiter casts a net far and wide at these events with a view to filtering enquiries and contacts down to those with potential to be worthy of follow up. A tactic similarly shared with Katie; perhaps unsurprisingly as they both represent large high-volume graduate recruiters:

“Yeah, so you see it very much as the start of the recruitment process in earnest, if you like. We’re like the pre-phase, yeah. So once we’ve got those leads, they can be

contacted in future, they can apply directly, they've got the information and we have them on the system, it's that first point of contact."

(Katie Emp-01)

In essence, this layered approach to recruitment means the employers view the process as a tiered approach – or to use a more visual description, a pyramid - whittling down numbers at different stages until you are left with the select few who are recruited (i.e. the apex of the pyramid). In this analogy, the careers fair is the wide base of the pyramid – the point of initial engagement and the stage with the largest number of potential recruits.

Developments in technology undoubtedly lends itself to making this stage more slick and effective. All three employers in this study (Katie, Elena and Sarah) offered up the notion of careers fairs as a large-scale opportunity for data capture. Furthermore, Katie and Sarah declared they use specifically designed data-capture software to ease this process.

Other key stakeholders in these events also acknowledge, and are actively complicit, in utilising careers fairs for data harvesting. According to the data, this is open, acknowledged from the outset, and accepted as part of the experience. Employers prioritise it (see above); careers services facilitate it ... "we make sure employers can mingle with the students so they can chat more informally and get their details down on ipads" (Amy CS-02); and the students expect it ... "I'm hoping to give them my CV and then maybe have a bit of a conversation with them but I expect they're busy so I'll let them know I'm on Linked-In so hope they might contact me" (Janelle PreS-04). A note of caution however - although many of the students in this study acknowledged that they were open to follow-up and therefore happy to hand over their details – none of the participants suggested any awareness that data capture was happening on such a significant scale and in such a systematic way.

Interestingly, out of the five in-depth interviews with students preparing to attend their first careers fair, none of them expressed a belief that the careers fair held potential for actual recruitment, not least in the sense of walking away with a possible job offer – or ‘direct recruitment’ as Sarah (Emp-03) described it earlier. One of the students, Emma, did believe that employers were on the lookout for potential recruits, which is different to recruitment itself:

“I think they are actually genuinely looking for people, for students and graduates, to be part of their team. Which is quite nice really.”

(Emma PreS-05)

This indicates that Emma at least, felt that an element of selection and assessment would take place, but in a more subtle way, that was a lighter touch than formal recruitment. What did emerge universally across the data set was the belief that the careers fair presented an opportunity to make tentative steps in the recruitment process. Here, Grace introduced the concept of making an initial connection that might lead on to other things:

“So I feel like I just want to get a bit of a scope of what kind of employers are there, find out what opportunities, speak to people face to face, because I always feel like face to face is better than a website or firing off an email and hopefully I can make an impression.”

(Grace PreS-01)

What is particularly interesting here is that there is an assumption the event has the potential to be the first step towards a deeper connection. Grace attends a Russell Group university but by her own admission, is ill equipped at this stage to compete in any selection

process, but at least has the confidence to begin a dialogue with them. In relation to my framework, she has a relatively narrow 'horizon for action'; but would like to broaden this through interaction and direct conversation with recruiters. Setting aside the exploration and opportunity awareness aspects raised for now, (I shall return to these); it is clear that this Grace sees this as a long game that begins with the careers fair. Likewise, Emma, a recent graduate, anticipated the careers fair to be a potential catalyst for further activity:

"It's a stepping stone really. I aim to use it as a bit of a stepping stone, because I think it is quite a hard transition into your career and trying to find work after you have just graduated, so this is like a middle ground."

(Emma PreS-05)

Note the illuminating use of two metaphors here to illustrate careers fairs providing a link between the current situation this graduate finds themselves in and where they would like to get to; not an end in itself but a possible means to an end. This suggests therefore that she is motivated, not by the perceived prize (a graduate job) but by the opportunity to begin a journey towards this ultimate prize. Conceptualising this within my framework, Emma sees the careers fair as a potential turning point – the stepping-stone – and points to a certain degree of self-awareness that recognises she feels stranded within the limits of her present horizon for action, and views the careers fair as an opportunity to recalibrate this. Several of the students interviewed at this stage, referenced similar themes – "I'm just hoping I can make a few connections or like network" (Nick PreS-03); "the main reason why I want to go is to socialise and network with the people on the stands" (Solamita PreS-02); "maybe I get the chance to chat with the employers and practise my skills" (Janelle PreS-04). This shows a remarkable degree of insight, in this sample at least, into what purpose a careers fair serves

and demonstrates a recurring theme in terms of what a student visualises happening at these events and how they are taking control of their expectations prior to attending. It is interesting that these expectations were also shared by employers. In this study, many of the employers spoke about initial engagement in a similar way to the students, in other words, not overtly about recruitment but more establishing dialogue and mutual fact-finding. Elena described this as a good opportunity to put students at ease in what can be an 'overwhelming place', and that those staffing the stands have a big responsibility to 'steer the conversation maybe, or at least be in the right frame of mind to engage with students on their level'. This shows a high degree of empathy with the student experience and an acknowledgement from Elena that meaningful engagement at a careers fair requires an emotional connection rather than just the transactional passing of information from recruiter to student. The data certainly suggests that those representing employers need to seek empathy with the students, and should that initial engagement go well the ultimate prize is there for all concerned:

"It's important to be an approachable face from the outset. We had something like 40% of our starters last year say that it all started from that first conversation at the careers fair and that, for us, is huge and shows we are doing our jobs right obviously."

(Katie Emp-01)

Acknowledgement therefore of a direct correlation between initial engagement at these events and a pathway to recruitment and when asked directly why it is Katie attends so many careers fairs, the answer was unequivocal:

“In terms of my job role, being able to come to careers fairs is another method of being able to source future talent and get a feel for what’s out there. It helps me do my job better, so it helps me be a better recruiter.”

(Katie Emp-01)

This is significant, particularly given that Katie works for a multi-national who have made increasing the diversity of their workforce in the UK a strategic priority, and tasked Katie and her team accordingly. Therefore, to be ‘a better recruiter’ and to ‘get a feel for what’s out there’ has a potentially significant impact on her achieving this strategic imperative.

From the perspective of the career fairs organisers in my sample, a prime motivator appears to be not just final year or recent graduates (as was the case during the Milkround years), but how they now reach out and engage meaningfully to make careers fairs appeal to the wider student population. This further challenged the direct recruitment aspect of careers fairs, as it introduced a motivation for attending that makes that particular rationale peripheral for many. For instance, here Amy neatly summarises from her perspective, this multi-dimensional potential role for a careers fair:

“I don’t think there is one overall reason why. It raises the profile of the Services, the Careers Services available because it’s quite a high profile event and it engages a lot of students across the University in one hit, if you like. Mainly it’s to get engaged students in discussion around the opportunities that are available to them, well, you know, in terms of employment and the workplace. So it would be looking at placement years, as well as graduate opportunities and that sort of thing and essentially to get them to look that little bit wider as well. A lot of students have quite a narrow view of where they might go with their degree, afterwards, so I think

it's probably to widen opportunities and to start having more in-depth conversations with employers about the opportunities that are there, which they wouldn't seek out to do, were the employers not on campus and talking to them face to face. So it's to start that process of thinking, you know, oh alright, actually I could work for them, you know, as well as, you know."

(Amy CS-02)

When Amy described a 'high profile event that engages a lot of students ... in one hit' this succinctly encapsulated the multi-faceted role of the modern day careers fair, both in terms of scale and stature within the institution, but also in its need to appeal to the wider student body – by definition a very diverse audience. This directly addressed my research question concerning what motivates attendance, as Amy's extract succinctly illustrated the wide variety of motivations and the attempt to accommodate these. Amy's contribution above also introduced two new perspectives on what motivates attendees – opportunity awareness and determining career options. I will cover each of these in the next two sections.

Opportunity awareness

Careers fairs are often the single largest manifestation of employer presence on campus, and often bring together employers who represent a cross-section of industries, professions and sectors. Traditionally many students approach their career decision-making process by initially considering what they are able to do, often based on their subject choice, and what is available to them. What emerged from the data in this study is that this curiosity to

explore options directly motivated some students to attend careers fairs. Some described the decision to attend a careers fair as attempting a journey of 'discovery' confessing that hitherto they had been 'narrow-minded' (Emma PreS-05) about their options. Nick was particularly interested in determining how transferable his course was and what currency it might give him in terms of possible opportunities:

"I'm just going to go around like talking to everyone and asking them like oh ok, I'm studying psychology, what can I do with this and hopefully it'll be helpful to see that you can also work with different companies with a psychology course"

(Nick PreS-03)

Nick was keen to use the careers fair as a means of acquiring new insight and information, but had to think through how this might work in practice. There is hope and anticipation that he might find what he is looking for by chatting to employers and would like to widen his scope beyond specifically psychology related pathways; however, he was looking towards the people on the stand to provide most of this. This plan to engage in a way that throws the initiative back to the teams on the stand is one that is familiar to the employers and there appears to be an expectation that students may initiate conversations at events and then it is down to the employer to steer the rest of it. It is a role that some recruiters are prepared to accept, as a knowledge and information trade off:

"It's awareness raising for both parties. I am able to educate the students more about what it is we do, but I also gain information from the students themselves about what attributes and skills they can offer up"

(Sarah Emp-03)

However, if the student is ill prepared for this exchange, or too uninformed to reciprocate in terms of meaningful dialogue, it may not be as fruitful. This is significant, not least because this apparent lack of awareness or prior insight might be a consequence of lacking the social and cultural capital to know how these things work or how to get the most out of them. In such circumstances, the careers fair is acting as a barrier and arguably perpetuating the gulf that exists between those students who know the rules of the game and those who do not. As can be seen in the extract below, there are small margins as to how an employer might perceive a potential approach. From my observations, there seemed little difference in the information being offered up by one student from the next; so, perhaps it is more a question of confidence and tone that makes it a very different conversation from the employers perspective:

“If they’re not that well equipped, its less of an information sharing piece and more of a well what do you think you want to do and you know, what skills do you think you can bring and sometimes it’s kind of more of that type of conversation. But the best ones are where the students know what they want, know what skills they’ve got and they just march up to you and say ‘this is what I’ve done, how could I fit in your organisation?’”

(Sarah Emp-03)

Perhaps it is the students’ ability and willingness to offer up the information, rather than be asked for it that determines how fulfilling the employer perceives the interaction. The issue with Sarah’s approach is that if this is a completely alien environment to a student, and they have never engaged with corporate recruiter types before, the risk is that they disengage completely rather than have the conversation in the first place. The challenge here is for

universities to ensure that students are prepared to articulate their attributes, but it still does not address issues of confidence, or lack of it, when in the space.

Nevertheless, it is clear that opportunity awareness is also a primary motivation for the universities who host and arrange these events on campus. The students in this study are a product of a university curriculum in the UK lends itself to an ever-decreasing narrowness in terms of subject studied and module choice. There is well-trodden educational path from leaving Year 11 onwards, which requires decisions that often serve to give the impression to the student that with each passing year things become more specialist and more niche. It is therefore understandable that often students feel unable or unwilling to consider what is available to them in a wider context, or transferable way, and for many it will appear counter-intuitive that over 60% of graduate vacancies in the UK do not require graduates with a specific subject discipline (ISE, 2017). Whether students are aware of this challenge or oblivious to it, or at a loss as to what this means for their own circumstances, depends greatly on how they have encountered messaging from their careers services and in particular, publicity surrounding the careers fair. Many universities regard the careers fair as an ideal opportunity for enlightenment:

“We hope significant numbers of students come along with an open mind, to explore what opportunities are open to them. Lots of employers will take students from any discipline so it’s an opportunity for them to speak to them.”

(Amy CS-02)

Amy’s use of the words ‘open’ and ‘opportunity’ indicates that universities are very keen to use these events to expand their students’ horizons and no doubt counter some of the conditioning that comes with many having to make narrower choices in subject specialisms

year after year. This relational dynamic between subject of study and awareness of what you can actually do with it, is one that can play different roles in terms of a motivation to attend a careers fair. Firstly, it can be a lead motivator in the sense that, as a student, you can use it as a starting point and explore opportunities that directly follow on from your subject. This is a reason offered up by students attending – “I just want to talk to them and say that I’m doing Psychology and what can I do for them in their company” (Nick PreS-3) – but is also a reason for the proliferation of specialist careers fairs based on subject disciplines or particular faculties. Secondly, a careers fair is an opportunity to think beyond your subject and start to appreciate the transferability of degree beyond its narrow confines – perceived or real. I will touch upon this more in the next section; although it is this aspect that universities are often keen to encourage in the lead up to careers fairs - as can be seen in this extract:

“We had a review recently and decided against having faculty based careers fairs as we want students to think more widely. There’s a lot of activity centrally and in faculty to direct students to look across the board at what employers are seeking. So I think students come to explore their area and other things, as well as things related to their subject”

(Amy CS-02)

Career options

Over the years, a charge often levelled at careers services is that students believe they should only engage with the career service once they know what it is they want to do. By getting these students to the careers fair, it is possible to break down this misconception. Here, Liz actively celebrates the fact that these ‘career clueless’ students attend:

“I love it when students go along because they think they have no idea what to do! I call them the career clueless and this is a good place to get a broad awareness of what’s out there and we try to get them to talk to the employers to realise that they actually have a lot to offer”

(Liz CS-01)

A particularly interesting element of this extract is that Liz goes further than just an acknowledgement of the university’s responsibility to create and format the event; she references an obligation on their part to induce conversation. Whether this is through incentive or compulsion or a mixture, will be considered later, but its significant in that it gives an insight into how far the university see its role as an active protagonist in this social space.

This presents an opportunity for students to utilise these types of conversations to begin the cognitive process of assembling and assessing options. This process is not just about a possible conscious awakening, nor is it exclusively an intellectual exercise only to be actioned at some point in the future, if at all; these conversations appear to have potentially practical consequences, as we see here:

“So for first year students, just to get a feel for what’s out there, they may go along and many of them won’t really have an idea what they want to do. It’s just the chance for them to have that one to one interaction with employers and then sometimes even the employers might have, you know, a summer internship scheme that they want to promote. So they can pass information about that on to the first year students, say, sort of explain to them, look if you do an internship, you could

then go onto a placement, you could then go onto a graduate, so yeah, its beneficial all the way through.”

(Diane CS-03)

This positions the careers fair at the start of a process – the first steps on a career journey that, in this instance, links to a series of more involved work-based opportunities, but for others may result in more defined thoughts on career goals. When the participants started to talk about what they envisioned gaining from interactions at the careers fair, it becomes possible to see Careership (Hodkinson et al, 1996; 1997; 2006) at work. In particular, the aspects that constitute the key ingredients required for effective career decision-making – exposure to structure (economic and labour market); the tools required to compete (education, skills and attributes); and individual agency (the ability to identify options and make choices) all at play and intertwined within the bounded space of the careers fair. The data suggested that careers fairs are indeed a key ‘turning point’ which can shape an individual’s ‘horizon for action’ (2006: 3) particularly as there can be no better example on campus of a constructed space where ‘education and labour markets and the dispositions of the individual’ (2006: 3) interact with each other so definitively. Prior to attending, it was clear from some of the students that they were braced for significant, perhaps revelatory, change in their career aims and vision for their own futures:

“I’m hoping it might give me some direction. I’ve only ever thought about my subject (Art) but never really thought about where I could use it. It could be like in finance or business or something like that and they might ask for more creative roles or creative thinkers within that.”

(Emma PreS-05)

This shows quite a sophisticated level of thinking around career decision making. Returning to the work of Hodkinson - in particular Careership - this ability to think beyond subject discipline and to consider transferability of skills, demonstrates an advanced understanding for a particular rationale for careers fairs, namely as means of expanding career thinking, not narrowing it down. A more personal 'turning point' was also reached with this particular student as they clearly demonstrated an openness to being influenced and persuaded. She has moved from considering career options with a clear and unequivocal correlation to her degree subject – in a way that society traditionally views the link between subject studied and career destination – to one where she has disassembled the learning and is looking to apply this in a wider variety of settings. This can be quite a moment for many university students and one that can initially meet resistance, self-doubt and inner turmoil, but not for Emma it would appear. It can seem counter intuitive within an education system that throughout continually challenges us to narrow down and specialise at every stage. To then be faced with the need to consider broadening options once more – it may seem defeatist and certainly not without risk. To reach this point she has had to reconcile the need to expose her vulnerabilities and anxieties about her future to scrutiny - within the safe environment of the careers fair – and embrace the possibility that she may encounter, or need to consider, some radically different perspectives on her possible future career destination. This is key to the idea-shaping potential of these events and nicely encapsulated the excitement, and slight trepidation, of what might result. This presented as a common theme amongst the student subjects of this study, with many anticipating (and starting to hope), that the hitherto narrow view of their potential options – reinforced and bounded by their course discipline – would be challenged and exposed:

“I think its like maybe at the beginning I thought my aim career is just business because my course is, as I say, International Business Management, but when I saw the list of employers, I thought it would be interesting to see what else I can do. I mean when I attend today there are maybe so many other areas to look at. Maybe I will be interested in teaching or the Army, or Yorkshire Water, who knows! I just need to totally spend more time in there and then I think, I may find a job or something I am interested in.”

(Janelle PreS-04)

The correlation she makes here suggests the length of time one spends in this environment is somehow linked to the potential value you might get from it. I doubt she is suggesting that this correlation is based on scientific formula, nor is there any guarantee, but it does reinforce this belief – evident throughout the data - that the relative preparedness you approach these events with, and the commitment you make to being genuinely open to what might happen, is inextricably linked to what you get out of it.

A belief that the more you put into these events, relates to what you might get out, does not necessarily mean that students intend to approach them in that way. As previously mentioned, the student subjects of this study, demonstrated differing reasons for attending and so the time they intended to spend in the space often reflected this. Another student in the study offered an almost ‘smash and grab’ view of how to use the careers fair for some initial fact-finding and inspiration. She identified that convenience was a real draw, and welcomed the informality that a careers fair might offer in terms of being able to ask questions and hold conversations, without obligation or risk of being accused of wasting people’s time:

“I know you can have meetings and book appointments and things like that, but sometimes like its nicer in that (careers fair) environment, when it’s a bit more open, it’s less formal, I guess, because you’re going round and you might only have one question, whereas you don’t need to book a twenty minute appointment to talk about something you’ve just picked up on. So it might just be a quick query, whereas you don’t really get the option when you’re in between your studies, on a day to day basis, to just nip and ask someone, especially if you don’t know the advisors and who to go speak to. So it’s good that so many people are on hand there.”

(Grace PreS-01)

Grace’s rationale for attending suggested that convenience was a key factor, but this extract can also be viewed in relation to confidence and perceived self-preservation; particularly as these students are unfamiliar with the look, feel and ‘rules’ of the careers fair space they are about to enter. The whole anticipated experience feels a lot more palatable if you can extricate yourself as quickly and as painlessly as possible should the need arise.

Janelle and Grace clearly have different views on how long to spend at the careers fair and although they may be contrary viewpoints, they are both equally valid and are certainly not mutually exclusive. The very nature and set-up of careers fairs means they can be utilised in a multitude of differing ways, including adequately catering for the differing intentions of these two students. The space is created and bounded; the main protagonists are in place; yet the individual’s experience of that space and these interactions are undoubtedly personalised and unique, despite the fact that they may be sharing the fair with hundreds of others at any given time.

From the perspective of the employers and the fair organisers however, this does not present an insurmountable issue as they feel the events are designed with exactly this diversity in mind. An open approach to these events means employers who exhibit are prepared to encounter a full range of queries and conversations from students of all description.

Brand awareness – the ‘Peacock’ factor

What clearly emerged from the data, was the significance employers placed on careers fairs as an opportunity to raise their profile on campus. There was a high level of candour from each of the employers interviewed that this formed one of the primary reasons for attending careers fairs – two even used the same phrase: “It’s *brand building* rather than a recruiting piece” (Elena Emp-02) and “I think from an employer’s perspective, its *brand building*” (Katie Emp-01).

As stated previously the standard rationale for employers attending careers fairs has focused on the potential for talent attraction and recruitment, but these disclosures in the study offered up an intriguing ulterior motive. For the interview subjects to be so refreshingly honest about this aspect was indeed a particularly pleasing thing to see in the data, and there is little doubt that this aspect, as a theme, recurs throughout:

“It’s a sales piece ultimately. We have all these fantastic stands advertising how big we are and how great we are, and we’re all jostling to be seen. We want to show XXXX as a top graduate recruiter and if we weren’t there what would that look like”

(Sarah Emp-03)

Succinctly contained within this short extract is a wealth of insight into how, particularly large companies, view the potential of careers fairs. As a 'sales piece', the careers fair can work on a number of levels. Firstly, as an opportunity to promote your company to students as being the most attractive option for future career success; and secondly, as an opportunity to promote the company as a commercial proposition, given that most will be service or product based entities. This implies a level of understanding and awareness from the employers taking part, that they are using the careers fair space as a means of establishing a position not only in relation to the audience (fair attendees) but also in relation to each other. This motivation to attend in order to assert or establish hierarchy or market positionality is one I will return to again in a later section, however it was such a prominent feature in both the primary interview data and the supplementary data (observations and unstructured conversations at careers fairs), that I began to describe this as the 'peacock' factor. In the extract above, this is described as employers' jostling for position with the explicitly stated aim of being noticed above the rest. There is also a specific emphasis on 'how big we are' and 'how great we are'.

"We try to stand out a bit as we are not a household name so we need a different way to get the students over to us. We'd get a few people come up to talk to us if we didn't make a huge effort, but you know, ASOS would be across the way with a massive queue, because people have heard of it"

(Katie Emp-01)

For some companies therefore, to stand out is a means of mitigating the fact that perhaps they represent companies with an unfamiliar group name or their products/services are not necessarily public facing; either way a large stand is seen as one tactic to compensate for

lack of brand recognition. Whether the motivation is in relation to each other - as a microcosm of wider sector rivalry and interplay - or simply to be noticed in such a crowded space, will vary, but it does at least explain the vast quantities of resource allocated to develop the stands/displays and their functionality. Another aspect of this relates to that fact that well-attended large-scale careers fairs offer many companies a great opportunity to gain unparalleled exposure to one of the most sought after demographics in UK segmentation populations. It is established practice for high street banks to target Freshers with free gifts, discounted travel cards and favourable overdraft rates – simply for opening a student account with them, knowing many will then bank with them for life and deposit significant wages over many decades. In a similar way, careers fairs are too good an opportunity for many companies to fail to seize the chance to promote their wares to significant numbers of potential future ‘customers’.

“Okay, so I think a big role as a recruiter on the stands is to sell the business to anyone who comes along. You are representing XXXX and its great advertising”

(Elena Emp-02)

This would explain the proliferation of ‘freebies’ available from exhibitors at careers fairs. A proliferation that has undoubtedly seen an upgrade in the quality and costs of such freebies in recent years. As the extract below illustrates, if you have no freebies, or just the standard array of gifts, to takeaway on your stand these days, prepare to be seen in a less favourable light by the students:

“I find that the more goodies you have on your stand, like again I’m going to use FDM as an example, they have USBs, universal phone chargers, pens and stuff, they have everything and I do get people coming up to me and going so what’s free on

your stand and I'm like ... erm ... a postcard. So it's really funny in that regard. I do think people with the more freebies get more attention"

(Elena Emp-02)

On the one hand, Elena gives us an insight into how some employers might measure relative impact of each of these events, in terms of queues and number of engagements; but this would be quite a superficial way of judging such impact. The amount of students that come up to your stand to relieve you of your freebies says nothing about the depth or quality of the engagement. However, as discussed previously, if it is transactional – i.e. a gift for your contact details – then that is enough to allow data capture of these details to take place, which is all that is required at this stage for some employers.

None of the students interviewed prior to attending the careers fair, expressed any awareness of the fact that they might be the target of a marketing/promotional exercise nor that they might find themselves part of a small manifestation of bigger sector power play between companies. This can be explained a number of ways. Perhaps they did not realise that this dynamic was a possible feature of these events prior to attending them - and why should they given the way these events are pitched. It could be that they held a certain assumption that, as officially sanctioned and facilitated university events, they would be protected from being seen as a target audience for anything other than careers-related aspects. However, I would contest that it is because this generation of young people have been the target of incessant multi-faceted marketing since a very young age, that it no longer registers as a thing. In other words, it would be more noteworthy from their perspective, if careers fairs were not seized upon as an opportunity by companies to promote themselves more generally.

Careers Services however seem very cognisant of this issue and it factors highly in decision-making and preparation. All the interview subjects with a role in organising these events, offered this up as a prime motivation, when asked why they felt employers attended careers fairs:

“So it’s an opportunity for employers - particularly at my university where it’s free of charge to attend – for them to have the chance to come and showcase themselves on campus. It’s a chance for them to promote their brand on campus to our students and graduates and just generally raise their profile ... and it’s free!”

(Diane CS-03)

Here is Diane is making it perfectly clear that, she is not naive enough to think otherwise. This was offered without any added subjective view as to whether this was undesirable, or is something they try to challenge. Careers service colleagues in this study were under no illusion that this aspect was a major motivator, but there was also an almost sanguine acceptance that this was often a metaphorical price to pay in order to have a successful well attended event. There was no resentment that this was a feature, rather simply a clear acknowledgement that this was the case. It also felt significant for the careers service interviewees to let me know that they knew that this was happening, and that they were far from oblivious about it. This adds credence to the view that stakeholders hold multiple rationales for attending and these are accommodated and acknowledged by each other, which creates such a multi-faceted event.

What is particularly interesting is the link made to the fact that this makes good business sense for the company. Irrespective of the potential for talent attraction and recruitment, the implication is that even the opportunity to have a presence in front of 1000+ students

for a five-hour window is worth it regardless of anything else. The reality is that no employer indicated they had ever considered this as the only factor for attending; simply that it was, for them at least, a very welcome bonus element to these events. There was less certainty on this matter from the careers service perspective, however, as can be seen from the extract below:

“I think that some enquiries I get from companies are questionable. I honestly believe I have had some in the past who have wanted to come to the careers fair as a free way of, well, just a free way of advertising. I tend to spot these and politely put that on a waiting list, which is where they’ll stay”

(Diane CS-03)

This provides a fascinating illustration of an instance, between two of the main protagonists, when things are not taken at face value, nor do positions and views remain unchallenged. Here we see a university taking on its role as gate-keeper and dutifully making potentially uncomfortable decisions in order to protect the integrity of the event and ultimately preventing their students from being misled or miss-sold. There is a recognition in Diane’s extract that the granting of privileged access to a significant numbers of students - who are arguably vulnerable in terms of realising the enormity of any decision about their future they might be about to take – has to be one safeguarded by those who create and facilitate this space.

How do these checks and balances take place? Universities will often ask recruiters to give an indication of their graduate vacancies and future hire plans; but in addition to that, this is a judgement call made by careers service staff – but an informed one based on experience as well as insight. A cursory look on careers service websites; particularly the employer-

facing pages that include booking systems for exhibiting at careers fairs, tend to stipulate that employers should have current graduate vacancies to offer. It is not a prerequisite nor a filter in the booking system, but the next stage is usually a conversation with a careers service team member at which point the employer will be challenged on this aspect. An experienced hand at this (such as Diane above) will have developed a variety of techniques to test the motivation of these employers and the veracity of their claims.

In Careership theory, occasional instances with the potential to alter significantly the direction of travel in your career are precarious things and the data shows that some universities do indeed regard careers fairs as a turning point. This is a pivotal time for students and there is evidence in the data from Diane that an awareness of this is implicit in how careers services approach and organise these events. Diane actively prevents these events becoming something that detracts too much from having career decision-making as its focus. Brand awareness can be supplementary to this focus of course and careers services are happy for a plethora of secondary motivations to 'piggy back' on this, so thereby sanctioning an increase profile and brand-awareness as a legitimate reason for attending, just not the primary one.

Location and creating the space

"All space is social: it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to social relations ... social space has thus always been a social product"

(Lefebvre, 2009: 186-7)

The careers fair is a social space and as such, there are a multitude of social actions and interactions taking place all the time. The careers fair space was a particular theme to emerge from the data, both in terms of how the protagonists used the space (later in this chapter), but also intriguingly in the insight it offered as to the decision-making that takes place prior to an event. Considerations around space and location are key to creating an environment conducive to maximising these interactions, so to facilitate such an event meant that location was a significant factor for those organising these careers fairs:

“For me, where we hold the careers fair says whether it will be a good one or not.

We’ve had some temporary locations recently due to building work and it’s made a real difference, not in a good way. Numbers were down and employers were not pleased about that or about finding where it was in the first place. Now it’s in the new Student Centre we’re all happy about that.”

(Amy CS-02)

This extract suggests how the organisers make an explicit link between their ability to secure the right kind of space, and the relative success or otherwise of the fair itself. This is clearly a key factor when organisers prepare to pull a fair together, and one that will either provide a robust platform upon which to plan and deliver the event; or alternatively, a fundamental hindrance to be planned around and mitigated. If a university charges for employer stands then rightly those employers will attach certain criteria to determine whether they have received value for money, and even if the university does not charge directly, the employer is still allocating time, effort and resource to the event. As such, an obvious, easy to assess, criterion will be numbers attending, as evidenced here:

“the best thing a careers service can do is to make sure it is well attended and to think about how best to do that, because it’s easier said than done, but it’s the main thing that makes you remember that fair was really good or not”

(Katie Emp-01)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, there are more nuanced measures of impact and success utilised by recruiters with regards to careers fairs, but it would be difficult for them to resist an instinctive assessment based on visible numbers and the general ‘buzz’ any such event generates. There is open acknowledgement in the extract above that this is far from straightforward and employers are empathetic when it comes to understanding the difficulties in generating student interest in anything that sits beyond the timetabled curriculum and, in particular, those all-important credits. However, as Katie highlights, recruiters will at least need to feel reassured that all has been done to make it a success and that maximum effort has been deployed.

From a university perspective, if the institution offers places at the careers fair free of charge (as increasingly many do these days), then the expense incurred is met by the university itself, so it too will have criteria designed to measure impact and return on this investment, one of which will be numbers of students/employers attending. Aligned to this is the need for universities to display their commitment to supporting the employability of their students in a way that is both physically high profile and unequivocal in its message. With this in mind, location on campus becomes a visible statement of intent for the university, and not just a logistical consideration. That does not mean to say logistics are not an important aspect of judicious preparation - both student and employer attendees want something that is easy to find on campus, particularly pertinent in recent years as many

campuses have grown their estate rapidly to accommodate a sharp increase in student numbers. There is also an imperative to make these events easy to access, which can be problematic when many campuses have been in what seems like a perpetual state of construction over the last few years. In addition, the practical implications of furnishing the careers fair space with the latest high-tech exhibition kit – a feature of the modern day careers fair - means the prospect of a large-scale event taking place in anything other than a ground floor space is now remote. This adds to the need to strive to find a high profile centrally located venue, especially one that is also faculty-neutral (i.e. not perceived as belonging to a particular department or school) as this is crucial if your showpiece careers fair is to have equal and universal appeal across the whole student body:

“For our fair, I think there’s an element of, because it’s a large fair, there’s a numbers game involved, because we want students from across the university. If we had it in the Engineering faculty building, no student from arts or humanities would bother to go. Many of them wouldn’t even know where that building was”

(Liz CS-01)

Here, Liz illustrated very succinctly how precarious the success or otherwise of a careers fair can be, dependent on choice of location. When considering motivation to attend, this, as Liz suggested, can be a deciding factor for students. A university can create an environment, which is welcoming and inclusive for the entire student body - it would have the look and feel of a university wide event, the promotional material and branding to match, and offer the widest possible range of employers, professional and sectors - yet could fatally undermine that universal appeal by a poor choice of location. One that, in the student mind-set, is inextricably linked to an area of which they have little or no knowledge or affinity.

Another fascinating aspect of location, to emerge from that data, related to a type of student who find themselves almost inadvertently stumbling into the careers fair space – our first encounter in the data of what I have notionally termed the ‘accidental tourist’. Each of the careers service interview subjects spoke about a type of student that attends careers fairs, who probably woke up that morning with no intention of attending – if they even knew it existed:

“We get a lot of students who just rock up on the day to see what’s going on, they see activity going on, maybe some of our promotional stuff that’s outside the hall, and they’ll see other students with carrier bags stuffed with freebies of course”

(Diane CS-03)

What’s interesting here from Diane is that not only is there a clear acknowledgement that this is a distinct, recognisable type of attendee, but in the view of the fair organisers, it is a perfectly valid one, and not something that should be deterred or discouraged; on the contrary these students should be welcomed:

“... but I like to think they do take advantage of it once they are there. Unlike some careers services we think this is fine, there are some careers services that I know that don’t actually let students go in until they have attended a preparation session. But I think that would be too hard to do at this institution, besides I think it’s better to get people speaking to people, having conversations, whether they are prepared or not. Why put barriers there? I think employers know the nature of what some students can be like at fairs, so it’s nothing they’ve not seen before.”

(Diane CS-03)

Implicit in the above extract from Diane, is the need for organisers to make a judgement call on this. Do they allow and encourage mass attendance in the belief that this will ultimately benefit the more students and please a greater number of recruiters; or do they filter and control access to the space in order to sacrifice mass numbers for better quality, more informed, interactions? The careers service participants in this study favoured the former, but did so acknowledging there are valid arguments for the latter. The intricacies and contextual factors involved in these fleeting moments when universities bring students and employers in direct contact are clearly not approached lightly by universities. They are more than conscious of the fact that years of careful reputation and relation building could be jeopardised by casual exposure to a few ill-informed, poor quality interactions. Yet, on balance, they seem to have enough faith in their students to widen the gatekeeper role, to embrace our 'accidental tourists':

"Some employers might think it's an issue, they say well a lot the students weren't relevant or interested and this kind of thing, you know, but I don't think that's a problem. We were talking a minute ago about employers that take any student from any discipline ... well, that's an opportunity to speak to them!"

(Amy CS-02)

In other words, Amy makes a judgement call that suggests unfettered access to the space outweighs any niggling concern that a carefully nurtured relationship or an institutional reputation for 'switched on' students might be put at risk. Besides, as suggested above in the extract from Amy, an employer might be pleasantly surprised; the implication being that they could potentially find that their ideal recruit was originally an 'accidental tourist'.

My research questions ask about rationale and motivation for attending, so what happens to some students that results in a last minute decision to attend? As mentioned earlier, they could be simply drawn by the crowds and the 'buzz' of the event; led by curiosity and the possibility of being entertained or rewarded in some fashion. Another reason is offered up by Diane as a significant factor – that of peer influence:

“There can be so many reasons why someone walks into that room. I think lots of people just go along with some friends who have planned to attend. They might hold back for a bit and not get stuck in straight away but you can see how they start to warm up after a bit”

(Diane CS-03)

If one takes the view that some students experience university through a series of socially constructed activities, with more often a greater focus on communal elements (lectures; group work; societies; social etc), than individual (self-directed study and tutorials). The time spent on campus – outside of the timetable – is often spent with other students in spaces specifically designed to encourage social interaction and sense of community. On most university campus, building projects costing millions have now created spaces with precisely this in mind, as universities realise this is a key to not just satisfaction, but more crucially, student wellbeing. It is in these buildings that many careers fairs are now hosted, so it is unsurprising that this draws in those friendship groups who tend to cluster in these buildings during their leisure time. A pattern of behaviour I observed many times over, at both fieldwork careers fairs.

One of the careers service staff interviewed suggested that careers fairs should reflect all the various misunderstandings that students have about when and why a student might

engage with anything a careers service has to offer. As such, they need to be welcoming for every kind of student, including those ‘accidental tourists’ who may – with too much time to over think the situation – never engage with anything the careers service has to offer as they will always find a reason to self-select themselves out of it:

“Sometimes I think careers fairs are reflected in the way that careers services are seen by the students in general, because I know we get some students say I can’t go the careers service because I don’t know what career I want to do yet. Where others say, you know, I know what I want to do so I don’t need the help of the careers service and vice-versa, so it’s a reflection of that so if we have students who haven’t thought about it too much and wander in, then that’s great.”

(Liz CS-01)

Liz made the link to the wider challenge careers services face, yet demonstrated that by being many things to many students’ careers fairs are an opportunity to rebalance expectations. The data was also illuminating when it came to considering how students who had yet to attend, perceived the space; how they imagined they might make use of it; and what they expected to happen within it. The student participants (pre event) in this study each offered up a vision on what the event might look like and how the space might be configured. This provided an interesting insight into their preparation and also relative levels of confidence. They also were refreshingly candid with regard to this aspect:

“I’ve got absolutely NO expectations of what it’s going to be like today! So the first thing I need to do is have a quick whizz round – not speaking to anyone – but see what’s there and what the thing looks like”

(Emma PreS-05)

Emma had done some research and had previously used the careers service website to look at tips on preparing, yet was still unable to properly visualise the space, let alone feel at ease with the rules and norms of interacting in that space. This demonstrated a challenge that many careers services face, in avoiding the assumption that even those students who actively engage prior to the careers fair, are aware of some of the more fundamental aspects that many of those involved in organising these events may take for granted.

There was a sense that many of these students were approaching more like an obstacle course to overcome rather than visualising it as a positive constructive space designed for friendly conversation and personal discovery. Language used in the descriptions of their intentions were very telling in terms of how they viewed the space:

“I’m just going to get physically stuck in around the room”

(Grace PreS-01)

“First off, I think I’m gonna thrust my CV to whoever, whatever chance I get!”

(Nick PreS-03)

This latter extract from Nick, suggested he was intending to enter the room and use his CV as a prop to either initiate engagement or to provide a focal point for any subsequent conversation.. The implication here is that Nick had spent time visualising how he intended to conduct himself in the careers fair space. Other students had done the same and also speculated how the employers would, in turn, respond to them, such as Emma:

“I want them to be quite firm, like I want them to treat me as an adult. I want it to be a really professional conversation so they can see that I’m not a kid anymore”

(Emma PreS-05)

Conversely, she also conceded that they needed to have realistic expectations of her at this stage:

“... but at the same time, I do want them to realise that I have just completed a degree and I’m just starting out. So I don’t want them to think I’ve got loads of experience. I don’t want them to expect I’ve got a great deal of experience but I want them to see I’m a good candidate with potential.”

(Emma PreS-05)

This aspect speaks to the nervousness that some students alluded to concerning how employer expectations of them may be at odds with the reality. A belief that they were looking for the finished article rather than simply the raw material that the students felt they could offer. It was almost as though the students had not considered that the recruiters themselves would tend to be veterans of the careers fair space and so would have more realistic expectations of the students they were about to meet.

Several students speculated on the layout of the space and although they mostly arrived at a view that was similar to the actual layout they would face, it was insightful that they had determined certain configurations more favourable to them than other formats. In the following extract, Grace concluded that the layout will be one of two versions she has visualised – a round room with employers on the outside and students on the inner; or one with a linear flow into, through and out the other end. In other words, an Ikea format:

“I suppose if it was a big circle it would be more daunting, because everyone’s in the middle and you feel almost forced to speak to them. I think if it were like that, I

would just probably panic in the moment. If there's rows and aisles, I suppose you can just work your way round and look and move on if you want to."

(Grace PreS-01)

This visualisation process is common when about to enter unfamiliar spaces, as a tactic to overcome nerves and face up to the unknown. Two of the students specifically referenced this in the study and offered up two different reference points. Firstly Nick related his back to previous interview experiences:

"I've had a few job interviews in the past and I find I get really nervous and I'm worried that this fair might be like that. I just get really nervous and forget what I wanted to say and if they ask me a question I just go, it's all gone. It will either be worse because it will be like lots of mini job interviews one after the other. Although it could be less daunting as it might be easier for me to talk to people at a stand than just in a little office."

(Nick PreS-03)

Here the dilemma is whether a careers fair presents a less angst-ridden form of employer-student interaction, or one that is just as nerve-wracking but on an even bigger scale.

The second comparison was offered up by Grace as she attempted to visualise the careers fair space, and drew upon her experience of the Freshers' fair:

"The way I'm picturing it is similar to how I felt about the Freshers' fair. I was ok til I got in there, I'd not really thought about it much so just wandered in and I felt it was quite daunting. I think being a first year and going up to the societies stands knowing that all those on the other side of the stands were final years or something, I just

struggled with that. It's the same kind of perspective, but just with employers.

Obviously a completely different atmosphere but the same kind of thing."

(Grace PreS-01)

This would suggest a lack of social capital to engage fully in these environments, particularly with perceived authority figures, represented at each by the students and employers staffing their respective stands. Together with an individual's propensity for social anxiety in certain settings, it can make careers fairs a daunting setting for those contemplating attending.

Choosing which fairs

The traditional milkround was akin to a grand tour of the traditional redbrick universities by employers and a mainstay of both the university and recruiter annual cycle. As discussed in previous chapters, it featured companies with similar recruitment profiles, albeit representing vastly different sectors and professions. This travelling caravan of recruiters would move around the UK during the autumn term and consist of high-volume graduate recruiters, with well-developed training schemes, and remarkably similar ideas as to what the ideal recruit might look like. This criteria might often include, a good A Level profile from a good school; on course for a 2:1 or higher; a natural aptitude towards the role; backed up by some voluntary work shadowing would be a bonus; as would a gap year. This worked well for the universities who could almost replicate these milkround events year after year, the employers knew that the targets numbers in their hire plans would be achieved, and for final year undergraduates it provided an obvious focus for their efforts as they progressed

from penultimate year into the first term of your final year. So slick was this particular recruitment machine that there was only one application form, for everyone. The aptly named Standard Application Form (SAF) was developed and mutually agreed by all the top graduate recruiters in the UK, to be the single template for all graduate applications in the milkround cycle. This made things simple for recruitment teams, the careers advisers supporting students, and the students themselves of course. These halcyon days were not to last however. A number of factors caused rapid diversification in graduate recruitment, including - economic volatility from mid-90s onwards; globalisation and mobility of labour markets; technological advances and the internet; expansion of HE sector post-1992; and the sharp increase in numbers attending universities (Ball, 2018).

Consequently, employers had a much wider pool of students to choose from, less generic and more specialist roles to fill, and the tech capacity to use bespoke criteria to suit their specific needs (Branine, 2008). It also meant more demands on their time re careers fairs, without the necessary resources to attend them all. This brings us to the situation we have now – recruiters have to employ certain criteria to inform their rationale for choosing which careers fairs to attend.

To attend any Institute of Student Employers (ISE) gathering is an opportunity to hear recruiters lament the fact that their organisations are not diverse enough and the talent they recruit is doing little to change this. The accusation levelled is that – consciously or sub-consciously – they continue to recruit in their own likeness; yet fascinatingly, some of the data in this study suggested that the recruiters I interviewed were purposefully seeking to diversify their entry cohorts:

“We’re always looking for candidates who can bring something different to the organisation. They make the best recruits and they are the ones that our hiring managers scramble for”

(Katie Emp-01)

Katie is specifically aiming to seek out recruits whose attributes, outlook, values or behaviours are substantially set apart from previous recruits, that they can be held up as bringing ‘something different’. Yet, later in the same interview:

“We have our universities tiered based on data that tells us where we have sourced successful recruits before. Not just the fairs that have generated the most leads, but those that have produced the most students to progress through selection and converted into hires. If we have a better strike rate at some places, we will prioritise those the following year.”

(Katie Emp-01)

On reflection, I would have challenged this during the interview, but it was only when reading the transcripts again that this apparent contradiction presented itself. The actions of some recruiters – however logical and grounded in sound business reasoning – are actually working against their stated objectives. How is it possible to diversify your intake if you continue to target only those universities you have recruited from previously? With this approach, a university with little or no track record in producing successful applicants for a company, would stand little chance of moving up the ‘tiers’ and making the attendance list for the following years careers fair.

Not every recruiter subscribed to this kind of approach and it was clear that each of the employer subjects of this study were genuinely keen on attracting diverse talent to their organisation. Sarah disclosed that to leverage additional resource in order to cover as many careers fairs as possible, they had challenged the senior leadership to stand firm by one of their strategic imperatives – namely to diversify their workforce and find those ‘hidden gems’:

“So we now take people from any background and any discipline. This means we have the go ahead to attend most careers fairs and I argued that we should – even if it’s universities we haven’t had much success. I would still go, probably more for fear of missing out on a hidden gem”

(Sarah Emp-03)

If anything, Sarah was now more dubious about those places that used to be the focus of their targeting:

“If our budget got tight and we had to reign it in ... I would probably ditch some universities like XXXX because sometimes the students are not engaged enough to get the most out of the careers fair in my opinion. They come along for freebies, don’t know what they want, and then tell you they’re off to Tanzania anyway when they finish so don’t really want a job yet.”

(Sarah Emp-03)

This is an interesting development, particularly for a company such as Sarah’s, which is one of the highest volume recruiters of UK graduates each year. For a few years, they have developed a reputation for covering a wide range of universities as part of their recruitment,

not least due to the numbers they need each year. However, in recent years, they have enthusiastically celebrated this attraction strategy, in particular how it links to social mobility; even winning several national awards as a result. A relatively recent, and increasingly high profile objective for many organisations - particularly large multi-nationals companies and public sector bodies - has been a concerted effort to alter the composition of their workforce by attracting staff that more accurately reflects society as a whole. This touches upon gender balance, BAME, regional representation, social class and even school background too. One cannot underestimate how powerful this agenda is within organisations, irrespective of whether or not the tactics deployed to achieve this are regarded as effective or not. One of the careers service interviewees, Amy, had noticed that this agenda was very much filtering through to the recruitment teams and had resulted in her university – one with a high proportion of BAME students - becoming a more desirable target:

“I have to say some employers come to us because they want to increase the diversity in their organisations. I mean we’ve found of late that some companies who haven’t come to us in the past because of our students UCAS tariff points, have now started to want to work with us and come along. I’m talking high profile big employers who are dropping the UCAS tariff thing and are looking for more diverse students. They’ve told me that themselves.”

(Amy CS-02)

Her university is happy to embrace this shift as it will expose the students to greater variety and number of opportunities, but it is interesting that the motives behind this shift are open and clearly discussed between careers services and employers. In terms of investigating

whether or not this change in approach remains confined to attending careers fairs or actually transforms the nature of the graduate intake, will no doubt be a topic worthy of further study. The fact that it is happening at all, and appears to be trumping the role of UCAS tariff points as lead indicator for some hire strategies, is in itself significant.

This objective to widen representation within the workforce has led some employers to adopt a more nuanced approach to attending careers fairs based on geographical targeting. An obvious example of this followed the BBC move from London to Salford a few years ago. It may be that this naturally sifted their outlook in terms of potential recruits but one of the primary reasons for the move itself was to attempt to dismantle the London-centric culture within the wider organisation. Other employers too, are seeking to address this – in the extract below from Katie, a shift in strategy was undertaken as a response to data analysis:

“We started to worry about the North. Not the big cities there but all the bits that surround them. We have good numbers from cities and from the Midlands but we thought we’d try unis that draw from some of the big towns. We all have our own patches so it’s quite easy to do”

(Katie Emp-01)

Data-informed decision-making was clearly a key feature of rationales for employers attending fairs; and arose in my conversations with recruiters, during interviews and informal interactions at fairs. What was less clear however was whether the subsequent actions were designed to simply test elements raised by the data, or whether they were designed to genuinely alter the composition of their intake? There is also the risk that any such movement in targeting careers fairs at hitherto overlooked universities could be tokenistic to sate the downward pressure from senior leadership in their organisations and

to tick certain boxes. I did not detect that this was the case and felt that efforts were genuine, if a little flaccid and misaligned at times. For instance, being seen to attend career fairs at universities with higher BAME populations is a great step forward and to be applauded, but would be more effective if the subsequent selection process was also name and university 'blind' for example, so unconscious bias in the recruitment stages was eradicated.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to present an analysis of the data designed to highlight an understanding of why the different participants attend and what drives their motivations and preparations. The very nature of this study is interpretative so the purpose here has been one intended to give a voice to the participants and, through analysis and in reference to the original research question I sought to answer, make sense of their own view of what motivates them to attend a careers fairs. Utilising the same approach, the next chapter will examine the data in terms of the actual event itself – namely, how the various participants of this study view their behaviours within the careers fair space; how they reflect upon their actions; and how they themselves interpret their experiences of a careers fair.

Interaction and Reflection

In this chapter, the aim is to examine how the main protagonists interact with the careers fair space and how they interact with each other.

Engaging with the Careers Fair space

Previously, this study has analysed the careers fair space in relation to expectation and anticipation; particularly from the perspective of those students who had yet to attend. In this section, the aim is to consider how each of the stakeholders viewed and engaged with the space and how they reflected upon these behaviours and the decisions that determined the nature of that engagement. Aligned to this is my own observation data - sourced via fieldwork conducted at two university careers fairs – designed to provide context along with the unstructured conversations I had with attendees at various points during this fieldwork.

The look, feel, accessibility and interactivity of the careers fair space was a significant emerging theme from the data and one that engendered opinion from all interviewees. One of the primary questions I sought to answer in my research, related to how the various stakeholders participate in these fairs and how they themselves understand the nature of that participation. It became clear that these elements were fundamentally framed by how they felt upon approaching and entering the space:

“As I walked up to the fair I was glad it was on the ground floor so I could see a bit inside before I actually went in. There were lots of big companies there and lots of people there; I think the numbers were that good that it made me feel more relaxed and didn’t feel like I would be walking into an empty hall with fifty people just staring at you, you know, waiting for you to come and see them. Because of the numbers

and the way it was laid out, it felt more relaxed and the companies felt more approachable because it didn't feel like everyone would be watching me!"

(Lewis PostS-01)

For the vast majority of students attending careers fairs, it will be their first time. Like most of us, including Lewis, that generates an understandable level of social anxiety and nervousness as our minds often start to model worst-case scenarios on our behalf. We see in the above extract, this manifests itself in a degree of trepidation and lack of confidence when approaching the space. Lewis's background offers up many of the characteristics that are associated with students said to be from WP backgrounds – he is a first generation student at a post-1992 institution; he lives at home with parents and commutes to university each day; and he studied vocational qualifications at FE College rather than A levels. It is evident in the extract that the lack of social capital made his approach to the careers fair quite daunting. Fortunately, the visual stimuli Lewis was exposed to upon his approach, was enough to allay most of his concerns; and did not ultimately make him change his mind. It does however demonstrate that right up until the point of entering the careers fair, there is still a lot at stake and those that organise these events need to factor this into their decision making and planning. It also can be seen from the above extract that any indication, however accidental, that the space was less than welcoming or would jeopardise the initial state of anonymity this student sought on entering the room – may have resulted in this student turning around, never to return.

In addition, this pivotal moment at the point of entering the space was actually more layered and nuanced than simply deciding whether to go through with attending or not. During my observations I witnessed a number of different behaviours focused on the

entrance point to the main fair space. Many I observed would stop near the doorway to catch a glimpse and survey the situation. They often seemed to be working out whether they would be accosted by an employer, and when I spoke to a student about this, she said she wanted to acclimatise first before have to subject herself to any questions from employers – hinting that she viewed conversations as the employers judging her. Another student I observed signed in at the entrance desk picked up a brochure, immediately left, and headed for the refreshment zone (outside the main careers fair). I later caught up with this same student – still in the refreshment area – who told me his tactic was to read the careers fair guide thoroughly; make some notes; do further research on the internet; determine who he wanted to speak to; and then visualise how the conversation might take place. He said he did not want to be distracted by all the ‘bells and whistles’ of the event, nor did he wish to seem unprepared, or lacking in insight, when having these anticipated conversations with employers.

Most students I observed, however seemed to register and then enter the event in one flowing movement and this was the experience of all the students I interviewed after attending a careers fair:

“I’d downloaded the (careers fair) App a few days earlier and so I’d looked at the map so I could picture what it would be like. That helped me to think about it. Plus I’d also been to an Open Day in the same hall so I guessed it would look a bit like that.”

(Ryan - PostS-05)

Ryan is a postgraduate student so he used his experience of campus life to make an assessment as to what the vent might resemble. As with earlier data from those who had

yet to attend a careers fair - where students speculated it might be like a Freshers Fair – Ryan demonstrated that for some students there is almost an implied expectation, based on recent memory, of what they would regard as being similar central high-profile large-scale events on campus. A format that is too radically removed from this expectation might unsettle or confuse some attendees and this could subsequently influence their view and experience of it. Conversely, a format that is too similar might mean that some, albeit subconsciously, regard the careers fair as informal as a Freshers Fair, which might not be the way to conduct yourself in these particular events.

Whether a careers fair is seen by students as a ‘formal’ or ‘informal’ social interaction generated different views. Ryan followed up from the extract above to suggest that he decided he would regard it as an informal space so as not to put undue pressure on himself:

“If you think too much about it (Careers Fair) you might be put-off by it. I was going into it in a relatively like informal way. See what’s going on and have a chat with people. Whereas if you were going to it a little bit more formal and putting yourself under pressure ... I want to speak to this employer and I must make a good impression ... then at that point you maybe get a bit more apprehensive about it. But just for me personally, I kind of, I never viewed the Careers Fair in that sense at all really. I just viewed it as a chance to go have a talk with somebody, as opposed to it being like a sort of mini-interview or something like that.”

(Ryan – PostS-05)

Ryan has made an active decision to interpret the space, and how intends to engage with it, in a particular way that suits him. A lot of my desk-based research (discussed earlier in the thesis) highlighted the amount of material produced by careers services, hard-copy and

online, designed to focus the student mind on the need to be professional at a careers fair, particularly with regards to your dress, conduct and behaviour. However, different students perceive different things from this advice around the level of formality this entails. A careers fair is an opportunity to make a public statement of intent that you have acknowledged the need for, and prepared for, the transition from student to employee, however the extract above from Ryan, does offer up the possibility that overstating this aspect in pre-event publicity, might actually be a deterrent for some and discourage attendance.

In the previous chapter, several of the student participants (who had yet to attend a careers fair) speculated on the layout of the event. Most large-scale careers fairs do appear to follow a particular ‘exhibition stand’ type format. There are logistical and practical considerations factored into this no doubt – i.e. limited space and the need to fit as many exhibitors in as possible. However, the data certainly suggests that both the organisers and the employers consider the decisions they make around use of the space to be key in maximising its potential. For instance, in this extract it is clear that Amy was keen to influence, if not purposely manage, the way the students move through the space:

“Our careers fair is like a trip to Ikea. Once they’re in it’s very hard for a student to get out until they reach the other end. This isn’t as sinister as it sounds it’s just so we create a flow and you know what, if a student wants to go back to chat to an employer they’ve missed, of course they can.”

(Amy CS – 02)

Universities do not simply find a space on campus, invite students and employers to come along, and then hope for the best. On the contrary, the data suggested that rather than the potential for engagement and interactivity at these events being left to chance, there are

significant efforts made to use the physical manifestation of it to maximise the elements they view as desirable, and likewise minimise those that are less so. Flow, and the control of that flow, is a critical element to this. A key consideration for organisers is the need to ensure recruiters view the event, on reflection, as worthy of being there – one criteria for this, as discussed previously, is numbers of students engaged. To influence the throughput at the event minimises the risk that an employer tucked away on the periphery of the space is not overlooked or by-passed:

“Uni’s have got much better at these things in recent years. I mean they are better at briefing students on what to expect but also making sure you don’t get overlooked. One year we were put in an annexe room and only about 20 people came in all day. Not great.”

(Elena Emp-02)

Disgruntled recruiters do not make for a good careers fair, nor does it encourage repeat business so universities must constantly factor this into their thinking and preparation. It is a difficult balancing act, particularly if as an organiser you prioritise one aspect without due consideration of another, as can be seen in this extract from a recruiter:

“The university had obviously had a big push on to get students there but the space just wasn’t big enough. Everyone had big stands and some had to spill over into a foyer. Then masses of students arrived! It was already cramped with just the employers in. I know you can’t magic a bigger hall from nowhere, so they really should have had it over two days or just had certain courses at certain times.”

(Katie Emp-01)

It would appear that the careers service who organised the event described here, had been a victim of its own success, but in reality, many of these logistical considerations can often be anticipated and should be mitigated in advance of the day itself.

There is an assumption suggested in the data – see ‘Ikea’ analogy - that most of those attending will be unfamiliar with the rules of the space. This therefore requires gentle persuasion, including explicit and implicit hints, as to how to interact. Part of this is to influence the journey into, through and out of, the careers fair space. The space needs to resemble those students expectations (e.g. Open day and Freshers Fair), but at the same time there needs to be acknowledgement that these expectations differ. It needs to be able to cater for different behaviours too. During my observations, and subsequent interviews with students, several types of behaviours began to emerge and it was possible to start to group these behaviours based on some common features displayed. In most cases, students tended to align more closely with one of these types, in terms of how they interacted with the space, however these characteristics were evidently combined by some and are not mutually exclusive of each other:

‘Explorers’

Based on my observations, a certain type of behaviour was evident in a significant number of student attendees. These are essentially the space conformists i.e. their interaction is a clear vindication of the organiser’s decision-making in terms of preparation, space and layout. This particularly aligns with the ‘Ikea’ description offered up by Amy (CS-02) earlier in this section. This explorer group is typified by a willingness to conform to the intended flow of the space – working through in a pre-determined linear fashion. When questioned as to

why; responses tended to focus on the fact that others were doing the same – peer pressure to conform – but also that the careers fair experience was one of hopeful discovery and therefore suggesting that any deviation from this linear path may result in missing something. In the following interview extract, Aneekah, articulates her belief that the ability to explore the space in its entirety - and gain the insight and awareness she sought - would fall short otherwise:

“I worked my way around it, I didn’t go looking for anything in particular. Yeah, I had an idea of what companies might be there and flicked through the brochure, but like I said, I was going in with an open mind. I didn’t want to go in thinking I’m just going to get these and then I’m gone. Obviously, I’m doing science so am interested in that but I didn’t want to miss any just in case. I did not skip any, I think, I got it all done.”

(Aneekah PostS-03)

This approach fits with the expectations offered up by previous student participants (prior to attending) that the careers fair is an opportunity to raise awareness about career pathways and being exposed to possible ideas and options. As such, there is a heightened sense of risk in missing out should the space not be ‘done’ in its entirety. The extract also offers up the notion that the careers fair is something that one should aim to complete, like a task to be accomplished. This may simply be a case of the careers fair activity being regarded in the same light as many other activities at university, such as a module or a project; but it could also illuminate a perspective some students have towards how they view progress towards a career decision. Namely, a series of tasks - such as a placement, a careers interview, CV session – that, if approached in the same diligent way a student might approach curriculum-based activity, has an accumulative impact on career choice and

securing your first graduate position. Perhaps universities need to do more work to explain to students that not every undertaking or activity offered up on campus is a challenge to overcome or task to be completed.

'Pre-planners'

The approach of this group to the careers fair space appeared to be more focussed and less susceptible to the distraction of visual stimuli, enticements, and the influence of any pre-ordained desirable layout. During my observation fieldwork, it was noticeable that these students tended to use their fair maps to accelerate through whole swathes of the space, rather than indulge the social conformities of committing to the linear flow. They were focussed in the sense that these students had a plan before entering the space, designed to target a particular stand/s. As Lewis shares with us here, this focus is shaped prior to the day itself:

“I used the careers website in the run up and identified a handful of companies I definitely wanted to see. I knew it'd be mad busy so I didn't want to just wander around hoping for the best so when, you know, I got in there, there was a map, there was a floor plan and I was able to see where I needed to get to. I circled them and, you know, made my way to them. I did look at some of the other stands, whose names I recognised, but that was just to make sure I was heading in the right direction and make my route.”

(Lewis PostS-01)

For those, like Lewis, who have done their prior research this would seem an effective use of time and an efficient use of the careers fair space, particularly when you are sharing that space with potentially hundreds of fellow students. A concern that the busy nature of these events might impede also factored in Iqra's decision to target particular companies before entering the melee. The potential reward from the careers fair was too important to enter randomly, hoping for the best; and students like Lewis and Iqra do see these events as a possible 'turning point', so a purposeful approach was required:

"I decided to plan beforehand so I knew which companies and my sister had said it gets really busy so avoid lunchtime. She found it hard to interact with some of the employers, as she had to wait for ages to speak to them. If I was going to queue then in would be only the ones I am interested in."

(Iqra PostS-03)

Both Lewis and Iqra knew their target companies were attending the event, and had researched them online beforehand, so were ready to present themselves and open up an informed discussion with them, without any particular stated desire or intention to engage with other employers. These other companies in the room did serve a purpose however, but perhaps not in the sense they might have hoped for; for Lewis at least, these were not potential future employers, but simply useful visual markers to gauge where his target firms were located.

The 'lone wolf' and the 'pack hunters'

A feature of the fieldwork in situ was that students either opted to move through the careers space as an individual or adopted to do so with friends in small groups. There are undoubtedly numerous reasons for this, not least the fact that whether they attend alone or with others might simply be down to the circumstances they find themselves in at the point of attending; and, as such, it would be an error to read anything further into this. However, I wanted to investigate whether, rather than by happenstance, any students had made purposeful decisions as to who, if any, would accompany them in and through the space.

For those who made an active decision to do this alone, it was seen to be part of a wider process to achieve clarity of thought and purpose. Other people – especially friends and classmates – can be a distraction. For some, our conduct in the space when with others would normally be one of compromise and empathy to the combined and multi-faceted needs of each other. For others, in anticipation of the need to potentially compromise to group-think, a decision was taken to go it alone and focus on personal need from the outset, rather than risk being unable to extract maximum potential from the opportunity. The following extract from Iqra, indicates her foresight concerning the possibility of having a less than impactful experience should she share that with others:

“I went along with my friend but she does accountancy so, and to be honest, I just wanted to speak to the ones I wanted to”

(Iqra PostS-03)

Ryan too went along on his own, and did so in order to ensure he was in control of shaping his own experience of the event:

“I stopped and spoke to the people I wanted to speak to. I wanted to really use this opportunity so if there were bits that didn’t interest me I could just walk past and carry on, I wasn’t waiting for others to catch up. Some I stopped at to chat others just to swoop on the freebies. I got free bread from Warburtons and now I can’t stop buying their Toastie bread! They didn’t get a new recruit, but they definitely got a new customer!”

(Ryan PostS-05)

In addition to providing a very powerful vindication of the complexity of the potential benefits to employers of attending careers fairs, such as developing a new customer base, Ryan also highlighted his unwillingness to compromise his objectives in having to share an experience with others at an event that by its very nature is focussed on developing something as fundamentally personal as your career pathway.

By contrast, as the careers fair was a new social experience for most attendees, instinctively many would seek solace and comfort in numbers. My observations certainly gave the impression that clusters of students (approximately between 2 and 5 in number) would travel around the fair, not necessarily talking to employers as a homogenous group but often moving along with one or two stopping to speak, whilst the others listened or temporarily disengaged from the group. It was also noticeable that these groups often reconvened for a quick group chat in between stands and to make sure everyone was still connected. In this extract, Obi explains why she and her friends decided to stick together, and how they agreed to tackle the space:

“Yeah we all like similar things and we do most things together so why not this? I wanted to speak to Farm Foods but I was happy to wait til we came to them. We

decided we'd keep to a row, one row at a time, you know, and I made sure to look around and we were all back together to move on to the next row."

(Obi PostS-02)

Obi and her friends were first time attendees at a careers fair and so relatively unfamiliar with the rules and the social norms of the space. To a certain extent, these can be acquired from family and friends prior to attending of course, but only if those family and friends have experienced a university careers fair themselves. As a first generation student, it is likely therefore that behaviours would have to be observed and interaction learned, relatively quickly upon entering the space. For many students this is easier to do alongside friends in a similar situation, and during my fieldwork I did listen to many affirmatory conversations taking place amongst friends away from the employers. These often took the form of asking whether their interpretation of a conversation with an employer aligned with theirs; whether they should ask certain questions; should they give their CV or leave contact details or both; is it ok to just pick up some literature from the stand without having a conversation; and so on. What was particularly telling was that – as a collective – these small groups would very quickly coalesce around a particular conclusion/opinion and then move on. By the end of the Fair, these pack hunters seemed very content when I spoke with them and certainly less timorous about the space that surrounded them.

'Kerbside' appeal

The modern day careers fair is a very visually stimulating environment, particularly given the competitive culture that has developed amongst rival recruiters, referenced earlier in the study when discussing the 'peacock' dynamic. The size, shape, functionality and technological enhancements to the display stands used by recruiters have seen a significant shift from the relatively formulaic and mundane uniformity of careers fairs stands of previous decades. As discussed earlier in this investigation, the reasons behind this revolution have been manifold and include; increased competition amongst recruiters; more cognisance around marketing and brand-awareness; greater expectation of students; the need for technology for data capture – but the fundamental cause remains the need to standout and appeal to potential recruits. The response to this challenge also has to comply with the logistical constraints that bind all attendees equally, namely the size of the plot assigned to you; but it has allowed for a high degree of diversity and creativity from recruiters:

“We spend a lot of time and money thinking about our stand but we used to use the same tatty vinyls and boards over and over again, but you just have to look at what some are using, I mean, how snazzy and stuff. Now it's a big thing every year to refresh ours and as you can imagine EVERYONE has an opinion! We even have ones with built-in screens but we need to know the tech and power is there before we bring it..... Gone are the days when we used to have pull-up banners permanently in the boot a man in a van brings ours these days!”

(Sarah Emp-03)

This extract from Sarah's interview, highlights a process of development from a display stand that that was quite portable and very functionally one-dimensional – namely identifying your company – to something far more involved and arguably multi-dimensional in terms of purpose and function. The underlying premise remains the same; to denote who you are and what you offer, however in an increasingly competitive market place to recruit new talent, the stands have become symbols of much more. It is the freshness and vibrancy of the design that denotes how the company would like to be viewed in the eyes of the students. It is the creativity and interactivity of the stand, that acts as an indicator of how innovative and leading edge they would like to be seen as; and the messaging used is a reflection of the values and behaviours they would like to be aligned with. This final aspect is key in attracting interest from those students who are looking for a future employer that is the right fit for them:

“I think a lot of them have like boards behind them that say what company they are from, white is quite clear, and some say what they are about as a company. That kind of thing is useful to know. So I could see a stand which had ‘logistics’ on so I was drawn to them straight away but it also said stuff about the environment and sustainability which was great.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

Iqra has highlighted here that there are criteria that are important to her, which sit beyond the name of an employer, and the career pathways it offers. Recruiters underestimate at their peril how significant these other elements can be for students in a post economic crash world. For many of them, financial incentives and eye-catching starting salary

packages may do little to attract the very students with the values and motivations they are seeking; on the contrary, they may even attract the wrong kind of candidate:

“We get students coming up to us saying they have deliberately missed out a stand further down that has ... ‘you’ll earn 40k plus if you start here with us’ ... because they automatically see that type of job as not appealing but making them miserable!”

(Katie Emp-01)

Over recent years, employers have undertaken significant work in looking at values and behaviours as part of the selection process (ISE, 2017), but perhaps they might do more to talk to recent recruits about how they do this at initial attraction stages as well, such as the careers fair.

Diversity

Many high volume graduate recruiters in the UK - the ones most likely to attend careers fairs regularly – are increasingly challenged at a strategic level within their organisations to do more to attract diverse talent. As mentioned previously, many of these employers have found their recruitment strategies to be actively working against this agenda, often of their own volition – i.e. decision to sift based on high UCAS tariffs; by over-valuing extra-curricular activities in the selection process; and by continually only targeting a select number of Russell Group universities. This has led to a situation where many recruitment teams find they recruit new entrants in their own likeness. Could the careers fair be a crucial opportunity to break this self-perpetuating cycle and tap into a more socially and ethnically

diverse talent base? The data certainly suggested it would be in their interest to consider this:

“If I saw a stand with people from my culture, or people from different cultures on, I would definitely go up and speak to them as well because then I know they are open to applicants of different backgrounds.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

This is quite unequivocal from Iqra, as she clearly states that seeing herself reflected back from the stand is absolutely key as to whether she would approach or not. Furthermore, she knows the imbalance that exists in the current workforce, related to her area of interest, so to see evidence that a company has a demonstrable record in pioneering diversity in this sector, has great appeal to her:

“In my area there’s a lot of white males that actually go into the industry. So if I was to see a firm and approach their stand and I saw a mixture between males, females and different like cultures, I think I would definitely go up as it would say to me that we don’t discriminate different genders and stuff, anyone is happy to apply and that is reflected in the people on the stand.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

Here she highlights the tangible nature of seeing people working for an organisation, rather than relying on mere aspirational words or tokenistic platitudes. An aspect she then references specifically:

“Yeah, it’s alright saying it on the website or having the pictures in the brochures and saying oh we’re this and we’re that, but actually seeing that in person, that

reinforces that. Yeah because I think a lot of students actually do a lot of research beforehand to see if the employers say they are like who they are on their website and so like some employers actually speak about diversity they have within the business – because it’s quite a big issue now – like different cultures within their business overall, but they don’t actually do what they say and so I think if a student actually approaches them and they see that difference, then I think that would encourage them to apply as well yeah.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

This is a quite powerful first-hand account from Iqra, and illuminates this issue in a clear way that demonstrates the level in which an employer’s stand, and the people staffing that stand, have a role in the career decision-making process that far outweighs the seemingly promotional and transactional superficial nature of it all. Not that all students would necessarily think this way. One of the student participants – herself BAME and female – offered up the following:

“Some stands were all men or all women. I didn’t really think much I just thought oh, they’re better at their job, better at selling the company, so they’re there.”

(Aneekah PostS-04)

Even so, this would suggest that at best, having a non-diverse staff contingent engenders a neutral response from students; but as Iqra’s testimony clearly demonstrates, having a more diverse representation on your stand can potentially be a significant positive. As Obi succinctly highlights below, this is not just about creating balance or avoiding accusations of

failing to reflect society or the student population, or to make the company feel better about themselves; it is potentially more directly linked to the recruitment agenda than this:

“What you make your company look like to the students will determine whether these students would want to work for you when they graduate, you know. So you have to make your company seem like a place that student would want to work in.”

(Obi PostS-02)

A view shared by some of the recruiters themselves; incredulous that a number of their fellow employers have yet to make the connection between lack of diversity in recruits and the way they project themselves when physically in front of those same potential recruits. In this extract, Sarah reveals how she has even taken to challenging some of her peers in the recruitment world to exercise a little self-awareness:

“I mean one thing I cannot bear is when you go to a careers fair and you look at a nearby stand and you just see a stand of white men! It just, I just, I just can’t believe it. I sometimes do go up to them and say what, you know, do you think that an Asian female would want to come up and talk to you? No, I think you need to be smart about who you bring to these fairs. A hundred percent we all need to be more thoughtful about who we bring to these fairs!”

(Sarah Emp-03)

As an insider in the world of recruitment, Sarah is well placed to see the inconsistency in, on the one hand, employers prioritising a more diverse workforce, and on the other, projecting their lack of diversity to potential recruits. In this extract, she moves from passive and frustrated observer, to potential agent for change by challenging them on this issue.

Not just issues of gender and ethnicity emerged from the data. These events were highlighted as something that the recruiters felt spoke to a larger diversity agenda within their wider organisations, but also offered views on how, if at all, a careers fair can be a vehicle through which such issues might be addressed, or at least mitigated in some way. In the following extract, Elena acknowledges that careers fairs are never going to completely level the playing field and that some students will always be at a structural disadvantage:

“I don’t think they can be truly equal for everyone. I find that students who English is not their first language or students who are introverted or just intimidated and anxious by it all, or students who are say, deaf, or have a similar disability ... these settings don’t work for them, it doesn’t work for, it’s not a one for all solution is it.”

(Elena Emp-02)

Elena was not suggesting that fairs were a waste of time for these students – and listening back to the recorded interview, her tone does not suggest she means that – but this highlights that a number of assumptions are made when considering that all students might be equally equipped to engage in this space. As such, it is incumbent on careers services and the recruiters to factor this into the planning and execution of these events. Some do already as Liz points out here:

“In the run up we link closely with the disability team and we try to gauge whether any of their students might need some adaptations or something on the day. We’re also thinking about having a small time slot before the proper event opens where some students with autism and such can have access before the mayhem starts. Not sure if we will end up doing it though.”

The issue to be reconciled here is to what extent students are to be part of an inclusive activity and to what extent some students might need or prefer a more tailored experience. Whatever Liz's university, and others, decide however has to be based on individual choice and circumstances, and not simply making assumptions based on the nature of conditions or labels ascribed to them.

Similarly, the 'anxiety' and 'intimidation' referred to by Elena, may be the result of feeling ill-equipped to function confidently in the space; symptomatic of the lack of social and cultural capital discussed previously in the study. So how can decisions made by recruiters, concerning careers fairs, help mitigate these issues, or in some cases inadvertently exacerbate them? One approach is to ensure that employers exercise good judgement in terms of engaging with students who display nerves, or those who are unable to play the networking game as effortlessly as some might. Likewise, displays of authoritative confidence should not be mistaken for potential to excel in a role or within a particular company. As Sarah points out below, employers have a responsibility to see through these traits and behaviours:

"We have a responsibility to think about the different backgrounds of the students we speak to. You see some students at the red bricks where they march up to the big law firms with a real kind of authority and you know they are comfortable in that environment because, you know, their Dad probably works for a similar firm, but we're (Sarah's employer) not like that. There are some students who might be the first in their family to go to uni, who are not having these kinds of conversations at home. That's a big thing for us which is why we go to most universities rather than

just a select few. So we're big on social mobility and in trying to pull people in, rather than kind of pushing them out.

(Sarah Emp-03)

This notion of 'pulling in' rather than 'pushing out' caught my eye in this extract. This speaks to the heart of the issue of social mobility and the recruitment world. For too long recruitment – certainly at this stage of the process – is about finding reasons to push people away or remove them from consideration. This is often argued for on grounds of practical logistics, namely a sifting exercise. However, here is an employer talking about striving to be inclusive and 'pulling in' at this stage of the process. If all employers approached their graduate recruitment with such a concerted effort to try to level the playing field, then there is the potential to make a huge difference in some of the existing social mobility issues that many large recruiters are, by their own admission, seeking to address. The consequences of this cannot be understated and what is arguably at stake here, according to Sarah, is not just the composition of new recruits within the annual hire plan, but a company's contribution to alleviating or reinforcing a societal injustice.

Representation

For many students a careers fair is the first occasion that they will come face-to-face with a potential future employer. Similarly, for companies attending the careers fair it is the first chance they get to assess the potential talent from that year's graduating cohort. This makes for a febrile atmosphere and one that can generate some great conversations based on good first impressions; or alternatively provide a litany of missed opportunities if

recruiter and student inadvertently put each other off. A particular feature of the data was the prevalence of certain decision-making by students in relation to how they felt they could relate to the people on the stands. The willingness, or otherwise, of students to engage with a particular recruiter was in some cases predicated by a judgement as to whether they felt the person on the stand was relatable. As Ryan explained here, this factor can be based on previous experience of starting university and relying on tutors to provide the necessary insight into student life:

“I think one of the things that particularly when students arrive at university, I think they, I certainly felt like this, I couldn’t really relate to my tutors. Like you know they’re up on a pedestal and they’re all up there and I’m down here and I can’t really relate to anything that they do and I think that there could be a little bit of that once you go out of university into the job market for some people.”

(Ryan PostS-05)

This experience of starting university obviously still resonated with Ryan and on reflection; he felt that a similar dynamic might be at work in a careers fair setting. At no point does he suggest that this would be a determining factor as to whether or not he would approach a stand; he does however, suggest it would affect the quality of the conversation that took place:

“I liked the stands that had people on who, you know, looked like they’d gone through all this recently. Gone through being a graduate who you can kind of go oh well that could be me in a year or couple of years. I could picture being in their shoes and then you can also have a bit more kind of, it’s a more relatable chat. Whereas perhaps if it was someone who was, you know, in a position of authority, a real high-

up sort of figure, that might be a little bit intimidating. I connected better with somebody of a similar age and a similar pathway and they gave me relatively recent advice as well, because someone senior might have done that many years ago, they might have absolutely no idea about assessment centres done these days and stuff like that. Don't get me wrong you want someone who knows their stuff but someone who has gone through the process recently as well."

(Ryan PostS-05)

Here Ryan makes a very convincing case for companies to include recent graduates as part of their staffing complement at these events. Not simply to represent the firm and impart knowledge on recruitment, selection, career pathways, and professional development, from a corporate information-giving viewpoint; but from a recent lived experience perspective as well. Students do indeed want to know the process, but student's such as Ryan, also want to know what it feels like to go through that process, to hear what it was like first hand, what do they wish they had done differently, what should they do to prepare themselves psychologically and emotionally, what unique personal insight can they provide. This is the 'relatable' element Ryan feels he gets from a recent graduate; an element that no corporate glossy brochure or senior executive viewpoint is likely to convey during a brief conversation at a careers fair stand.

The theme of recent graduate recruits on stands was universal in the data, as every student interviewee offered up this perspective unprompted and each described it as an enhancing and positive feature of their careers fair experience:

“I liked it when they sent someone just removed from studying themselves. They send new recruits and they can give, I feel, a more honest representation of the company”

(Lewis PostS-01)

A sense from Lewis that the lived experience of a recent recruit will provide a more authentic ‘warts and all’ account, as opposed to perhaps a more sanitised company view from a more experienced recruiter. The students did give the impression that they viewed staff on the stand who they regarded as ‘senior’ or ‘boss’ type figures as quite daunting and, although some, such as Obi (below) felt there was a role for these people, it was better for them if that person was also accompanied by someone more relatable on the stand too:

“I think it’s good to have a new graduate on the stand because sometimes I found it a bit scary if maybe an older or more serious looking person was on the stand. But if there’s a balance between, you know, the boss and then the new employee to relate to us, I think that would be, that was nicer, yeah.”

(Obi PostS-02)

Iqra also felt that the insight of recent graduate recruits would help current students to visualise themselves in the process and inspire them to believe in themselves:

“I think a lot of students want to actually speak to those who have actually gone through the process and successfully got the job. Having them speak, like from their point of view, makes students believe in it more.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

The responses from participants, such as Iqra, suggested that they were inclined to view recent graduates on the stands as almost independent sources of advice and information despite the fact they were salaried members of staff, operating in a promotional and sales role in line with the recruitment objectives of their respective companies. Providing this authentic voice at such events is quite a powerful position to hold and one that many of the recruiters themselves were only fully starting to appreciate. What better way to promote a career with your company than to do so in a way that the audience sees as relatively impartial from any party line, but also one that is designed to provide insight for their benefit rather than the benefit of the company they are there to represent. One of the employer participants in the interview phase, Sarah, offered up her thoughts on this particular aspect, and speaking to those staffing the stands at the fairs I observed, many had brought recent graduate recruits with them and in some cases, current placement students. Sarah, in the following extract, is quite clear that employers need to place more thought in relation to the people they choose to represent them at these events. Not least, because they will project and represent a particular image of that company, but also the composition of these representatives is inextricably linked to the potential value they will extract from the event:

“To be honest, we used to just decide purely on availability. Often it might just have been the local representative from our local office that rocked up on the stand. But they don’t give a shit if we hire anyone or not, they saw it as a day out of the office.”

(Sarah Emp-03)

Clearly, staffing based purely on convenience and availability was not really working for the company she represents, nor helping her achieve her recruitment targets. There is also the

potential for reputational damage, as students would see apathy and disinterest from those on the stand as possibly symbolic of the culture and behavioural norms within the wider organisation:

“Too many times I walk round fairs and see them sitting behind desks, on their phones, not even looking up never mind engaging. First thing I tell my staff is to get rid of the chairs and leave your phones alone.”

(Sarah Emp-03)

Those changes alone are not sufficient, according to Sarah. There are much more fundamental considerations about who and how you are represented at careers fairs:

“Just look at your stand... Have the people on your stand that represent the workforce you want to create.

Think about male – female split, diversity on your stand. I’m not saying we are doing it in a perfect way ourselves just yet, but I definitely think there’s something all recruiters could learn.”

(Sarah Emp-03)

That particular phrase from Sarah – “have the people on your stand that represent the workforce you want to create” – encapsulates this theme, and the one discussed previously around diversity. A careers fair is rightly often seen as an opportunity for potential recruits to impress a future employer. However, as important, is the reverse of this dynamic, whereby the chance for an employer to impress by projecting a particular message about themselves into the mind-set of the students, takes on even greater significance given that so many first impressions are being formed on that day.

First impressions

The opening dialogue between student and recruiter is a pivotal moment at these events. It could be that these first impressions can soar or crash based on the opening interaction, so it is hardly surprising that the data suggests these can often be predictable, mundane and relatively benign. A safe and steady opening, no doubt to minimise the risk of putting off the other party at the very outset:

“We always joke because we find we play this little game at the start where 90% of the time it’s the same questions and answers back and forth. Almost like you have to get these out of the way. Either they offer up what course they are studying or we ask them. Then it’s usually, but not always, what does the company do and what roles we have on offer. That type of thing. We must go through that hundred times a day!”

(Katie Emp-01)

It is understandable that for the recruiters they might start to feel jaded by having the same or similar interactions many times over and in this extract, Katie at least acknowledges that this happens. The difference would be if this started to affect the recruiters’ ability to retain an open mind beyond these opening formalities. Nothing I observed at these events, nor any of that data sourced directly from the employer interviewees, suggested that this was the case. More often, it was a fully accepted part of the interaction and offered up simply as an observation, by the recruiters, with a wry faux-exasperation rather than anything more serious. As mentioned previously, many of the behaviours at careers fairs are based on an acknowledgement that there are certain unwritten rules and roles adopted by those who attend. These can relate to the flow around the event, the offering up of a CV, or even the

idea that sweets and other such goodies should only be taken as a reward for engaging in some kind of interaction. These behaviours can be viewed as almost ritualistic and the rules of these rituals are carried out in an obliging way by the various protagonists who are complicit in recognising the particular role they play. It is within this context that the formulaic opening to many conversations seemed to fit this description too, and were deemed necessary to get the two parties to a stage where they can then take the conversation into a more bespoke direction.

Many of the students in this study recalled that the employer spoke to them first:

“They said hi and what course are you studying and what are you interested in. That helped as I don’t think I could have just walked up and started speaking without making a fool of myself.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

This extract from Iqra’s interview sheds some light on the role the recruiter in easing the students into the situation – crucially important if the student is unsure of the overall environment and lacks the confidence and capital to shape the dialogue themselves from the outset. I did observe some recruiters wait to hear a student open the conversation – perhaps to test their ability and confidence in doing so. However, based on other data, such as Iqra’s extract; waiting for the student to open might help those who possess the social and cultural capital to feel at ease in such a space, but could hinder those who do not. As Katie, one of our recruiters explained:

“It’s easy to forget that all this is second nature to us and we can just talk to any stranger and start to engage. You forget how hard it once was. But for a student

faced with all these ‘grown ups’ on a stand, they don’t know what question or comment to open up with! So they just sometimes come up and sort of start smiling at you. Which is quite lovely really and this is our sign to encourage them and start off with a ‘hi’ and who are you, what are you studying, what are you interested in and take it from there”

(Katie Emp-01)

We are dealing with very fine margins; being confident and engaging should never be regarded as undesirable or put you at a disadvantage. However, if recruiters and universities want careers fairs to be inclusive – and actively facilitate fairer access to the graduate labour market - then the opening interaction within the space must be seen through this prism.

Exploration

Following the opening interactions, the next phase was one based around fact-finding by both parties. This process involved the exchange of information and knowledge by both parties and was offered up unprompted or asked for and freely given. A particularly interesting feature of this part of the process was the phenomena of acquiring information and knowledge by proxy. Almost every conversation I observed at the careers fair – up close or from afar – was accompanied by several students listening in. In fact, this made my ability to do the same as the researcher much simpler - far less obvious and intrusive; and meant I could do so without standing out. For some students this was their primary activity, and I watched them move from listening in at one stand to the next, with relative ease. This may have been a tactic designed to overcome a lack of confidence, and if so, it is certainly a

successful one as, unlike many of our other social interactions throughout any given day; it appeared that the two individuals engaged in the conversation did not mind that others were listening in. It was expected and, in the case of the recruiter, actively welcomed, as they would often offer up their responses to the wider group gathered – evident by use of eye contact – and not just the individual in the conversation. Again, this speaks to the peculiar rules of the game evident at careers fairs. Information and insight being given was just as readily taken on board by the handful of students surrounding the conversation, as much as it was the student actually receiving it. Ryan, for instance, deployed this tactic throughout the fair, primarily as a prelude to engaging directly with an employer:

“The busyness is nice because sometimes you might overhear a conversation that might relate to you. Well, ear wiggling really, I’m good at that. It might give you a lead ... oh I heard you talking to so and so just then ... it might give you a bit of a lead-in.”

(Ryan PostS-05)

Another reason for doing this was offered up by Iqra, who used the tactic of listening in to others at stands she was not particularly interested in, as a way to work out what she might say to those employers she wanted to engage with personally:

“For the first few stands I was mainly listening in to other people so I could actually gain some experience before actually moving on to the employers that I wanted to speak to.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

This indicates one possible way that new entrants to the careers fair space are able to pick up the rules of the game. Students are very adept at finding ways to assimilate and comply to the culture norms of the university experience more generally, and therefore we see a pattern at careers fairs where students will firstly listen and observe, and then adopt and mimic. It would also explain why stands at the start of the space often seem disproportionately busier than those further on – these first few stands are arguably providing an on-the-spot tutorial for students.

As discussed previously, having representation on stands that reflects the diverse student population can make an approach from a student more likely. Determining whether this then develops into a feature of the conversation itself is a separate matter, and one that did emerge from the data. The personal ‘lived experience’ was an ever-present topic discussed during the conversations I listened to, and was used for both inspiring students, and as a means of illustrating the transitional process from student to employee. Often a powerful and authentic means of conveying some otherwise quite dry procedural information about recruitment, selection and assimilation into a particular company. In addition, the careers service staff themselves, recognised this as a prominent feature and felt this often made for the best direction of travel for any initial conversation:

“After saying hello and establishing areas of study and interest, often the representative will start to offer up their own personal experience to the students as an illustration of how you can progress and that’s something which we hear a lot of. It’s good to get the, you know, how was it for you, from the representative”

(Liz CS-01)

This was something the students reported in the interviews as being a key means to conveying information. The following extract from Lewis is typical of how establishing relatability can then become a vehicle for conveying necessary information:

“It was good to hear he’d been in my shoes recently. It made it more personable. We spoke about the nitty gritty, about going through the different stages like, you know, the website, telephone interviews and so on ... if you’re successful then this happens, then this happens next. He said it wasn’t stressful and looking back he felt they only did things that were needed, rather than some places where they make you jump through hoops, where there’s about five interview stages and then more assessment centres.”

(Lewis PostS-01)

As Lewis suggested, this approach is allowing potential candidates to visualise themselves in these processes, which is a very powerful rationale for holding these events. This is the careers fair as a vehicle to convey those first-hand accounts of recruitment and selection, workplace culture, and skills and attributes - that ultimately inform pivotal decisions, in a way that websites, brochures, or careers service workshops do not come close to providing.

The duration of the conversation, or rather the pressure to keep things brief was a theme that occurred within the data. The sense that time was limited and that whatever needed to be said, by either party, had to be done in a succinct way, was something that the students felt helped to focus the conversations, but conversely could also add to a sense of being rushed:

“It was really busy, so sometimes you’d get started and I asked then about the roles and what’s it like to work there, but I realised that I had to keep it quick and try to remember what was said, listen to what I was being told and kind of take it on board as I couldn’t stand there talking forever”

(Aneekah PostS-04)

This is understandable given the size and scale of these events, in particular, the volume of attendees. The sense I got from observing and talking to the subjects of this study was that this was, overall, a positive thing, rather than something that detracted from the experience. As with Aneekah, the students realised that they had a short window to seek information and impress; likewise, the recruiters know that this is the only way they can keep the flow moving and reach more students. Another interesting element of Aneekah’s extract above, relates to the conversation as an information-gathering exercise – ‘take it on board’. The opportunity to speak with a recruiter can add an extra dimension to the information readily available via websites, not just in terms of the depth and quality of such information, but also because of the immediacy of the interaction between student and recruiter. In other words, the information quickly becomes much more bespoke in a way that static webpages do not allow. Obi had clearly done her internet research but had a query that related more to workplace culture and ethos:

“I looked at the website, so I made it clear that I had done my research which I think impressed them. What I really wanted to know though was about training once you were working there. I love studying and want to carry on my education in any way I can so I want to work for a company that would support that and train me as well. I

think that once I learn, I can do well in whatever role. So I need to know you offer training because I won't know it all at the onset."

(Obi PostS-02)

This provides the recruiter the opportunity to provide the necessary information but to also assess Obi's starting point and determine a route best suited for her. Which introduced another emergent theme that focused on the recruiter as a source of careers advice and coaching. In the section based on motivation and expectation, it was clear that many felt the careers fair could prove to be a source of advice, not just relating to specific opportunities or companies, but also around how to achieve progression and career success more generally. Many of the employers spoken to as part of this study revelled in this particular role, not least Sarah, who felt that this aspect engendered the most appreciation from students and was a real opportunity to make a tangible difference to that student's employability there and then:

"A lot of them are actually really grateful, or they have certainly enjoyed the opportunity of talking to an employer and being made to feel more confident about themselves. They'll say to me at first, you know, all I do is work in Greggs. Right, stop saying all you do ... so, you work in Greggs, you've worked there for three years, that demonstrates resilience, commitment, good customer sales experience, you're a key holder so have responsibilities, you know, there's all these things where you can pull out skills that you've got. Then you see them thinking oh right, I didn't think a graduate employer would be interested in my time at Greggs but now I know."

(Sarah Emp-03)

Hearing this advice from an employer like Sarah will possibly resonate a lot more than from a university staff member, a careers adviser or personal tutor, for instance. The employer provides an authentic voice on these matters, as highlighted previously in the student data. Here then, is an interaction where the focus is not framed around the particular jobs or career pathways available within Sarah's organisation specifically. She seems happy to set this aside, albeit temporarily, to provide a steer to students and is clearly willing to fulfil this advice-giving role regardless. She readily embraces this wider role of offering her insight and experience, which indicates a greater depth to careers fair interaction, for all stakeholders, than simply a narrow desire to talent spot and recruit.

Standing out from the crowd

Evidence in the data sourced from employers - discussed earlier in the analysis - did indicate that they were open to being wooed by any student that particularly impressed. This was not the only reason they attend these events of course; nevertheless, during the interviews they did offer up examples of what kind of interactions often indicate a potential candidate is worth watching. Katie was very clear that she attempts to spot the individuals whose outlook, personality and questions would suggest that they are the right fit for her organisation:

"I like it when the students ask me what I enjoy about working for XXXX. This says to me that they are motivated by more than money... that they are looking for a fulfilling career. That's a sit up and take note moment for me! Especially if they ask about company culture, or my typical day, or a day in the life of. The best recruits we ever have are the ones who you can tell enjoy working for us."

(Katie Emp-01)

A student who attempts to gauge and understand whether the organisation would be the right fit for them, in Katie's view, suggests an attempt to engage more deeply with the company beyond the relatively routine topics of selection process or salary offered. This is about visualising yourself establishing your early career pathway within a particular organisation and, providing the conversation points to a certain level of mutual compatibility, a marker for the recruiter that this student could become a candidate. This view was echoed by the other employers, with Elena also declaring she is always impressed by those who have clearly done their research beforehand and can demonstrate this in the conversation quite naturally rather than regurgitating web text back at her:

"It's great when a student knows their stuff because, you know, you can quickly move on to, about maybe, technical specifics or particular departments, or maybe where the role will take you. Some students just tell you what they've read and then pause wait for you to be impressed."

(Elena Emp-02)

This is about depth of engagement. The difference here is that knowing your stuff, as a student, is not necessarily standout in itself, but being able to use that as a platform to take the conversation on, certainly is. From the organisers' perspective, the depth of the engagement is also viewed as an important way to be remembered by the employers:

"When we speak to the stands after the event they always remember the students who were passionate about stuff, the role, the job, life in general! They also like

students who can show they have done shadowing, internships, volunteering as it says something about them.”

(Diane CS-03)

This is similar to feedback you will find further on the recruitment and selection process; and as these recruitment teams are involved in that too it is not surprising that they look out for similar attributes at these initial stages. This does point to the need for universities to provide effective and targeted preparation for students before the events. Many are doing more around this as careers service organisers have realised that the event itself is the culmination of the careers fair process – a process that many believe should begin well in advance of the day itself:

“We encourage attendance at our workshops in the weeks before. We cover CVs, looking presentable, how to research companies, look at different skills and just understand a bit more in-depth. They should prepare questions before hand and try to stand out a bit because I mean, it’s going to put them in a good light when they’re talking to employers and say oh yes, I noticed this on your website, or I really like your mission or vision and that kind of thing.”

(Amy CS-02)

The conversation needs to be natural and informative for both parties, but a degree of preparation, as suggested by Amy, should provide a greater number of different directions the discussion could go down and also help to familiarise the student with what is likely to take place. A student with work experience, for instance, can offer this up as an example of their suitability and hope the connection can be made and then considered by a recruiter,

but even better if the student has prepared a means through which they are able to communicate and articulate that suitability themselves. This could potentially make all the difference when trying to stand out amongst an assembled cast of hundreds of other final year students and recent graduates.

Call to action

Many of the conversations I observed at careers fairs seemed to conclude naturally, without firm commitments expressed by either party; so no job offers from the recruiters and no commitment to exclusivity of application from the student. Based on analysis of data earlier in this study, this is as one would expect of course, but the lack of a more obvious and overt call to action did not disguise the fact that during the interactions, a means to follow up or a commitment to continue to engage had been established.

“If they are interested in us we try to take their details and we make this as easy as possible using our ipads, that is technically making an application even if we don’t call it that. We have met them, you know, it is a case of, and we’ve done this lots of times previously, we’ve had a chat and its gone really well so we flag their details and fast-track that application.”

(Katie Emp-01)

Here we have data that clearly points to careers fairs as the gateway to the application process, rather than simply a fact-finding opportunity. A relatively innocuous gathering of contact data can actually set a student on the path to being hired. When probed some more about the potential for progression via this route, Katie elaborated as follows:

“I’d say a success on the day would be thirty plus footfall sign-ups and probably out of that we’d get five or six who we make a note of to keep an eye on. Within the next week or so, we’d contact everyone but would particularly chase up those five or six. It does whittle down a lot but we usually get one or two people from each fair start with us.”

(Katie Emp-01)

This extract is particularly insightful as in many ways it helps us to go full circle with recruitment and careers fairs. Firstly, a superficial look at the purpose of a careers fairs would suggest it is about recruitment; then more in-depth study shows that actually much more is happening here than any actual recruitment; yet finally, on reflection, it does appear after all that they are potential vehicles for recruitment, only in a slightly more understated, less obvious way.

For the recruiters in this study, the careers fair call to action became a personal project too:

“It’s the work you do afterwards that gets you the hires. The careers fair is an important bit but it’s also the easy bit. When they get a follow-up email it’s sent from me with my email address and they are directed to deal with me whether that’s asking questions, wanting a chat, submitting their application, and if they get a call, it’ll be from me.”

(Sarah Emp-03)

The personal touch highlighted by Sarah, is no doubt based on evidence that this maximises the chance of retaining candidate interest throughout the process, but also demonstrates how important that initial face-to-face interaction at the fair is – in a way that perhaps

alternative methods of generating interest, such as virtual careers fairs and presentations, fall short.

For the student too, there is also a responsibility to end the conversation with the means to follow up should the interest be there. I observed students providing recruiters with their CV, which seemed like a common way of introducing a prop to be used in the conversation but also as a way of proffering contact details. Iqra, who throughout her interview demonstrated an eagerness and creativity that would, in my opinion, grace any graduate selection process, typically tried something a little bit different:

“I created my own business cards before the fair. I included my Linked-In on there as well because I do a lot of networking on there and I hoped they might take a look and realise how committed I am. I want employers to actually like know what I’m like so I gave them my card and then they’ve got my details. Some of my friends from my course, they were like a bit, they were not sure about that.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

Doing something different and memorable, within reason, is an effective way of standing out from the crowd and Iqra had certainly given this some thought. Her friends were less than convinced it seems, but as highlighted previously, different students want different things from the careers fair, so are prepared to approach the event with different priorities in mind. For most students there was encouragement on offer from the careers services to seize the initiative and get into the habit of following up in a courteous and professional manner:

“They (students) should definitely get a business card or email from the recruiter if they can, and be emailing afterwards to say thanks, nice to meet you, had a really good conversation and this kind of thing. Sort of saying I’m still really interested, can I come and visit, any opportunities for work shadowing, internships come up, that kind of thing”

(Diane CS-03)

Increasingly careers services are doing more to facilitate outcomes from the fair. Incentivising the next step to be agreed, and in some cases, even carried out there and then. For instance, at Amy’s university they have started to offer interview space for impromptu more in-depth conversations:

“It started when a few employers asked if it would be possible, so now we offer them the chance to take a student to some designated rooms and interview on the day. For others we offer them the option of coming back and doing that at a later date.”

(Amy CS-02)

It is in the university’s interest that any opportunity to make the recruitment of their students and graduates any easier should be facilitated if practically possible. This I observed during my fieldwork, when I noticed on a couple of occasions, recruiters leaving their colleagues on the stand, to go and grab a coffee with a student in the refreshment area. The subtlety and apparent informality of some of these various calls to action should in no way detract from the fact that all parties regarded this as a key aspect of the

experience. As the data suggested, the ultimate impact of a careers fair is intrinsically linked to the follow-up that happens as a result.

Reflecting on the event

When considering the possible impact of the careers fair, the overall experience is arguably at risk of being sidelined once we start to disaggregate and analyse its component parts, however one should never underestimate this holistic aspect. Universities are very keen to create the right kind of experience for all concerned, and for recruiters in particular, their hosts now make a more concerted effort to provide a pleasant, feel-good experience, as the data also shows that this is high on their criteria when assessing the relative merits of an event, not least whether or not to return:

“Yeah, you remember the ones, I think the room, the organisation and stuff, I think as a recruiter, were obviously busy and the careers guys are busy. But if you’ve had an early save the date email, it’s well in advance, you’ve had a follow up email, you’ve had joining instructions, you know where you are going on the day, the hall is central and the right size for the fair; there’s water, tea and coffee waiting for you and so on. I mean it makes it a lot nicer. It’s annoying if you have to choose between going to one event and missing another, but I’ll be honest I might choose one that brings us less leads, but we have a better relationship with and they look after us, they’ve welcomed you, you’ve got Wi-Fi, it’s just the little things sometimes.”

(Katie Emp-01)

A clear indication that, in this case at least, the overall experience for the employer can even trump the business imperative of generating recruitment leads, and a stark example that numbers, however important, are not always the bottom line. No doubt, recruiters discuss with each other these matters too, so all of a sudden there is potential of reputational risk to a university of getting this aspect wrong.

It is precisely because the recruitment world is so close knit and the same group of individuals tend to travel around attending these events one after another, that their reflections are particularly insightful. Although careers fairs have continued to evolve over the years, the data from these recruiters suggested that they are still recognisably the same type of activity in principle as they have always been:

“I’ve been doing these for a few years now and although everywhere does things slightly differently you can tell they are the same deep down. In fact, the fairs I go to now are very similar to the one I went to when I was at uni.”

(Katie Emp-01)

Why have they remained relatively unchanged throughout an era that has seen so much change in almost every other aspect of the university experience? This relates to the difference between evolution and fundamental change. Careers fairs have not undergone such an existential shift in their make-up to the extent it would render them unrecognisable to those of previous decades; for instance, they do not now solely exist virtually; nor are they entirely subject specific; or run exclusively by private providers rather than universities. What has happened however is that they have evolved to embrace new approaches, outlooks, expectations, technologies, and types of jobs/sectors. This has meant the change has been gradual and this continues to be the case.

This gradual change is, in part, in line with the evolution of the expectations of those attending. I was fortunate to observe robust feedback and evaluation processes – during and immediately after events and in subsequent weeks - designed to help to keep expectations aligned with the reality of what attendees would experience. The data generated as part of this study, offered up universal agreement, from all stakeholders, that careers fairs still meet their expectations, regardless of what those expectations are. For instance, Obi was particularly happy that the careers fair increased her awareness of what was out there:

“It was great for me because it reminded me why I am at university in the first place. It makes you see the bigger picture and know why you are actually studying hard and it helped me plan the next step in my career”

(Obi PostS-2)

Likewise, Lewis who attended primarily to get more information about what might be available to him when he graduated was similarly fulfilled:

“It made me really aware as to what was out there. If I hadn’t gone that day I would only be thinking about companies I already knew about or seen on the TV or something. It exposed me to a wider circle of employers and jobs.”

(Lewis Posts-01)

Iqra on the other hand, had quite high expectations as to what she hoped she would achieve at the careers fair; not least given her dedicated and thoughtful preparation beforehand. Fortunately for her, the careers fair also lived up to her specific expectations too, as she explained in this extract:

“I followed up with emails to a few companies after the fair. Some got back and I ended up speaking to them on the phone. Anyway, in the end I was able to organise two insight days with two different employers and one has led to an internship as part of a Women into Logistics scheme! As part of this I’ve also got a woman who is my mentor and she already works in the industry.”

(Iqra PostS-03)

Iqra here making a strong case for the old adage, ‘you get out what you put in’. A positive outcome and one that clearly demonstrates that creativity, effort and perseverance can result in a careers fair providing the springboard for both tangible outcomes and facilitating fairer access to areas of the graduate labour market which have particular challenges to address.

Summary

In this main *Results and Analysis* chapter, the data has proved very fertile in understanding how these individuals participating in this study make sense of careers fairs. Typical of such an approach, my role as a researcher has been primarily focused on analysing the data and themes in an attempt to make sense of how the participant is making sense of what is about to happen, is happening, or has happened to them. This ‘double hermeneutic’ (Smith et al, 2009: 3) approach is one I was self-conscious of throughout the analysis and I hope my interpretation of their accounts has done justice to their experiences as expressed to me during the interviews; capturing their reflections, thinking and feelings about careers fairs.

By seeking to position this sense making in a way that addresses my research questions - focussed on expectations and interactions – it has also enabled me to identify emergent themes and then cluster these abstractions to form super-ordinate strands (Reid et al, 2005) which links and embraces data from across the various participants. My aim was to present these themes and strands in a way that highlighted the particularities of the individuals involved and their views, thereby extracting those ‘unique idiosyncratic instances’ (Smith et al, 2009: 101) which have enriched this study. At the same time, I have brought together these super-ordinate themes, from multiple accounts, to create and present some ‘shared higher order qualities’ (Smith et al, 2009: 101) from the research.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my findings within a wider context - with reference back to extant literature where it exists – and more specifically through my conceptual framework of Careership theory. I will also look at the implications for practice and for possible future research. Consideration will include a focus on, and reference to, my original research questions, but will also cover aspects that emerged from the data, which, although not originally anticipated, became a feature as my investigation developed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of careers fairs from the perspective of participants, drawn from the three main stakeholders. In particular, to determine to what extent those attending such events feel their expectations were met; what factors influenced a participant's ability to get the most from careers fairs; and how certain aspects could be improved or introduced to support students in their transition into the labour market. As the literature review attests, this topic has escaped thorough investigation previously, particularly qualitative research designed to explore the elements highlighted above. In this chapter, I aim to place my research within a context of related literature, and aim to demonstrate how this study has not only addressed my original research questions but has also contributed to our wider knowledge of careers fairs.

To frame the investigation, my research questions focused on the following aspects:

- Expectations and motivations (RQ1)
- Interactions and activities (RQ2)
- Reflection and fulfilment (RQ3)
- Recommendations (RQ4)

The literature review identified aspects of university-student-employer interactions on campus and queried what link, if any, these interactions might present, concerning career decision-making and progression towards a successful transition into the workplace. Careers fairs stood out as a high-profile manifestation of such tripartite activity and one that had hitherto been relatively overlooked by researchers, so these questions sought to illuminate how and why stakeholders prepare for and engage with the careers fair; not only as a social space but also as a vehicle for accessing the graduate labour market.

In common with Hansen (2006), evidence from the data has demonstrated that careers fairs serve not just one but several purposes. They are indeed transactional in relation to the coming together of two main elements – talent supply (students) and the demand for that talent (recruiters). However, for employers they are also about raising awareness of brand on campus; wider business development; direct engagement with a highly coveted demographic; positioning in relation to competitors; and part of a wider relationship with universities. My study goes further than Hansen's findings in that it uncovered another dimension to the multi-faceted role of the careers fair; namely, that for students they can expand horizons; increase opportunity awareness; inform career decision-making; provide insight into selection processes; be inspired by near contemporaries; or even present opportunities to impress a future employer – and all combinations thereof. The analysis clearly aligns with Milman and Whitney (2014) assertion that 'these events are planned not only to recruit, but also educate and even entertain and reward student attendees' (2014: 176). The proliferation of freebies and eye-catching or quirky features to the careers space, as witnessed during my observations, certainly attests to this dynamic. However, the findings of my investigation demonstrated that the rewards were not just immediate and superficial – the additional rewards for students potentially included a greater career readiness, increased opportunity awareness, contacts for further action, and not least, added capital gained through experiencing such an event. Building upon the findings of Payne and Sumter (2005) it was also possible to see instances of their six identifiable markers that denote careers fair purpose and experience – information about careers; information on the hiring process; jobs related to course; industry contacts; internship opportunities; and the overall aspect of the careers fair as an occasion. Each of the interview subjects referenced several, if not all, of these aspects during the research and

this therefore links to how their perceptions of what to expect were formed (Pre-Fair students), and then subsequently fulfilled or challenged (Post-Fair students). Each student had found something at the careers fair to reassure and confirm that their expectations had been met; however, they also found plenty of other elements that had been peripheral or even non-existent in their range of expectations. The analysis of the data demonstrated that the disparate expectations held by the various protagonists and their motivation to attend, are inextricably linked and individualised to that particular student, as such, careers fairs have evolved in a way that attempts to cater for many of these, all at the same time, in order to stay viable and relevant. This vindicated the decision to conceptualise careers fairs using Careership as all three elements of this theory are intertwined in this experience – exposure to structure, pre-existing and newly acquired capital, and the individual agency of decision-making. This combination of expectation, motivation, interaction and rationalisation generates the personalised experience; and the ongoing interpretation of this practical, emotional and cognitive experience forms the ‘pragmatic rationality’ (Hodkinson, 2008: 6) that underpins decision-making in Careership theory.

By positioning themselves to be many things to different people, the risk is that they fail by under delivering on expectations. The analysis, however, shows that careers fairs are agile enough to ensure that attendees are able to interact with the event in a way that satisfies their needs and in some cases, goes beyond their original expectations. In other words, rather than multiple rationales being a fundamental flaw in a careers fairs ability to demonstrate purpose and deliver on that; it has actually become a strength as they have been able to adapt successfully and remain significant, despite some very turbulent changes in higher education over the years. This study illustrates that multiple purpose does not detract from overall impact and these differing strands rather than compete for prominence

and ascendancy, coexist in harmony. In fact, the analysis has highlighted that rather than simply finding a begrudging and pragmatic accommodation between these different roles; this dynamic actually enhances and enriches the events themselves.

In determining how these expectations are formed in the first place, I have determined that they are a product of the unique lived experience that the student brings with them as they approach the point in their university journey where attending a careers fair seems appropriate or timely. By this stage, potential attendees have already begun to develop a particular perspective on the event and the opportunity it presents to satisfy their needs. This then frames expectations and is used as an ongoing point of reference that determines how students interpret whether or not they feel the event has been worthwhile. The actual experience can either reinforce or challenge these perspectives; but more likely, according to the analysis, it is far more nuanced than that. Expectations can be reflected upon by the participants, but the experience of attending was often the catalyst for more strands of interest and curiosity to develop – not least, due to the fact that these events exist to move an individual further on in their career awakening from whichever starting point they find themselves before entering the space. As such, careers fairs can be understood through the overlapping dimensions of Careership theory – ‘the positions and dispositions of the individual; the relations between forces acting in the field within which decisions were made and careers progressed; and the on-going longitudinal pathways the careers followed’ (Hodkinson, 2008: 4). Drawing heavily from the seminal features of Bourdieu’s work (as discussed in earlier chapter), Careership provides a conceptual means of understanding careers fairs. Bourdieu enabled us to see concepts such as structure and agency not as exclusive or opposing forces, but as much more interrelated and nuanced. Hodkinson built upon this in relation to career decision-making, and offered a career theory that worked on

a meso-level, rather than the seemingly opposed traditional perspectives of person-centred focus, such as Krumboltz (1979) which operated on a micro-level, and the structure-focused approach of Roberts (1975), which worked at a macro-level. Hodkinson (1996) argued that neither of these satisfactorily reflected his research data (on Training Credits for young people in the UK), and Careership developed to address this. In essence, Careership holds that 'career decision-making and progression take place in the interactions between the person and the fields they inhabit bounded by a person's *horizon for action*' (2008: 4). This interplay between an individual's disposition and the field they are part of, creates the horizon for action – but these can change when exposed to or challenged by events we encounter. In relation to my findings, I would argue that careers fairs are a catalyst for the re-evaluation of personal dispositions and a recalibration of the horizon for action. Furthermore, in common with Careership theory, that holds that career development is not necessarily linear, careers fairs have the potential to provide a dramatic change of direction from the routine. What we see in this study are people anticipating and preparing to expose themselves to an event that might just prove to be a 'turning point' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 39). For the employers and careers service staff, their role is one of facilitating the opportunity for turning points to occur and to bring with them those other component parts of the field, other than the individual's pre-existing disposition. In this study, some students had yet to determine whether their experience at the fair was to be a turning point in their career decision-making, or perhaps something routine. This is understandable as many were still digesting and reflecting upon their experiences. Nevertheless, the process of attending itself meant something had changed - the careers fair had instigated a reassessment in career thinking and for some, such as Iqra, they interpreted this as representing progress towards an ultimate career goal. Careers fairs bring together these two key features of

Careership – horizons for action and turning points. For the former, they enable students to peer over the existing horizon, evaluate what they see, and then establish a new one; and for the latter, the careers fair presents a break from the routine and an opportunity to realign, or expedite career development. Often it requires longer-term reflection to illuminate the full extent of this, something Hodkinson (2008) himself admits in his later work, but I would argue that this does not detract from the value of his original theory. With the passage of time, the careers fair experience that was originally seen as a turning point can indeed turn out to be actually routine, or vice versa. After all ‘perceptions of routines and turning points are partly a matter of scale and such transformations can often only be recognised with hindsight’ (Hodkinson, 2008: 7). However, in the immediate aftermath of a careers fair, when action and recalibration tends to be initiated, that influence of the event on subsequent decision-making is every bit as significant as perceived in the moment. Hindsight only diminishes recollection of the scale of that moment, not the actual scale it holds at the time. The analysis of the data in this study shows that it is the perception of the event in the relatively recent aftermath that frames and contextualises a student’s next steps, and is therefore the criteria which determines whether the careers fair was a turning point or not. Throughout my research, I have framed this study in relation to Careership and, for the student participants in this investigation, the careers fair was indeed a turning point and, by attending and then reflecting on the experience, they each recalibrated their horizons for action accordingly. To summarise this point with reference to my original research questions, the Careership framework provides a compelling prism through which to view careers fairs. The analysis shows that students contemplate and then visualise careers fairs prior to the event, developing a series of expectations based upon their pre-existing horizon for action. They then enter and interact with the event – the potential

turning point – all the time challenging and readjusting their views and perceptions based on what they are experiencing. As a result, the consequence of this for several student participants in this study was a redefined horizon for action; infused and enriched with new information and insight, and designed to better prepare that student for their next step.

The recent work of Peeters et al (2019) on Employability Capital, I would argue, adds a new dimension to Careership theory and it is possible to see the findings from this study within the context of their conceptual framework which aimed to combine the plethora of ‘personal resources which promote an individual’s employability’ (2019: 80). The data from my study demonstrated the potential for careers fairs to expand the career-related knowledge an individual requires, as well as offering an insight into behaviours and attitudes needed to function effectively - be that a successful transition from university to work, or subsequently progressing in a particular organisation or through the various stages of your career.

This study also provides something distinctive that serves as a precursor to the notion of critical contact, introduced by Porter et al (2004). Although my study does not track students through application, then hire, then progression as an employee; the analysis nevertheless suggests that a positive experience of the initial contact moment made at careers fairs, forms a basis for any future relationship should there be one. Porter suggested that it is this critical contact that lays the foundation of an unspoken psychological contract between the employer (as represented by the recruiter) and the potential employee (the student). This consists of signals that illustrate what it is like to work for the organisation and what values and behaviours exist, so a potential candidate can determine whether that organisation is suited to them. However whereas Porter et al place this critical contact at

the point of recruitment, I would argue that this is too late. The notions and signals he outlines are all found within careers fair interactions. We see employers utilising the opportunity of initial contact at careers fairs to convey a number of messages that establish these connections. The analysis also shows a number of the student participants asked questions with a view to assessing suitability; not least in relation to determining whether they could visualise themselves working there and feeling fulfilled. Some students seemed less inclined to use traditional indicators of value, such as salary levels or the perceived status of certain professions. Instead, the data would suggest that finding an employer they deemed was the right fit for them was more important. As such, they were more likely to enquire about working patterns, ethical values, location options, and future training and professional development opportunities. This is an important point for employers to reconcile as they seek to find an effective approach to engaging with students. To misjudge their offer or to create an impression that fails to resonate with the student body is not only a missed opportunity but also a potentially costly error in terms of resource, effort, and time. Employers should embrace research, such as this study, which suggests that a more nuanced approach is required to capture the interest of students. They should think about their uniqueness; their passions and beliefs; their professional values and behaviours; and not least their commitment to continually developing staff once on-board. Factors that companies would be wise to project on their websites and in their glossy recruitment collateral. Based on this investigation, they should also ensure their representatives at careers fairs are fully able to articulate these authentically and passionately.

The recruiters interviewed for this research each told how many of their eventual hires had their first interactions with the company at a careers fair. They subsequently explained that the follow-up that then occurs - including participation in the more formal aspects of the

recruitment and selection process – adds extra elements to this initial contact and creates further depth and meaning to that psychological bond initiated at the careers fair. According to my findings therefore, the careers fair does facilitate access to the graduate jobs market, but not usually in a direct way. Employers do not make hiring decisions based solely on the interaction at the fair but it is clear that these events instigate a process that, for some, leads to employment. As my study was not a longitudinal one based around tracking the journeys of individual students, it was not possible to see this process come to fruition amongst these particular research subjects; however, the testimony of the employer representatives in the data pointed to the pivotal role the careers fair performs in this respect. As a catalyst for recruitment - rather than the actual point of recruitment itself – there is a tangible role being performed in this transition process from university to world of work.

The next consideration, in line with the fairer access element of my final research question (RQ4), is whether the careers fair is helping to diversify the nature and composition of this recruitment; or simply reinforcing what has gone before. In keeping with the underpinning principles of Careership theory, the interrelated threads of structure and agency are manifest in careers fairs. The challenge faced by universities and employers is the extent to which they are able to determine, anticipate and then mitigate where necessary. For instance, my analysis suggested that each careers fair – whether observed by me or attended by the interview subjects – reflected the fact that a concerted effort had been made to create an uplifting and optimistic environment for those attending; infused with limitless potential and a sense of unbounded futures. This festivalisation of careers fairs is not just an affectation; it is purposeful and is part of a process of energising and empowering the students. As Hodgkinson described, ‘narratives of hopelessness and

passivity narrow horizons for action in ways that significantly reduce agency, whilst narratives of hope and proactivity have the opposite effect' (2008: 14). In other words, even the general fanfare and enthusiasm that surround a careers fair has the potential to open minds and push the boundaries of possibilities, before a recruiter is engaged with or a single word is spoken. However, the findings in my study also brings us back to the reality of the experience for many students; namely, their horizons for action are framed by what Hodgkinson referred to as 'external inequalities' (2008: 14). Creating a positive atmosphere will help some students to reconsider or even redefine their options and allow some of them to be more agentic in the careers fair space. Organisers of careers fair must always remain cognisant of the external inequalities the students carry with them, however as we have seen in the analysis, both they and the recruiters, can respond to this challenge in a way that reduces or mitigates these inequalities.

From the analysis, there is a clear appetite to strive to make the interactions more meaningful in the moment and to try to break down barriers, perceived or real, that students may face. There was a focus placed on projecting the right image from the outset and a keenness to make a good first impression. These findings are consistent with the work of Milman and Whitney (2014), who asserted that organisations should take a proactive approach in influencing the view students acquire of them. Stating that 'there is a need for employers to evaluate their recruitment processes from a student's perspective and assess the needs and wants of the current generation at the first encounter with employers during a career fair' (2014: 174) – very much in keeping with views of the employers in this study. Building upon this however, is a feature evident in this investigation, namely the recognition of the need to project a presence that the student will find more relatable. This relatability is seen in the form of having recent graduates on the stand – in some cases having recent

graduates who are alumni of that same institution. The employer participants also spoke about utilising placement students who then find themselves back on campus, imparting their recent lived experience of the recruitment process and organisational culture to their peers. However, the employers' main ambition – and one they conceded had yet to be achieved – was to ensure the composition of the team on the stand was also representative of the diversity of their organisation, or perhaps more accurately, the diversity they aspire to have in their workforce.

It was evident in the analysis that some students make significant initial decisions based on the how the employer presents themselves at the careers fair. The participants in this study were happy to divulge that they made assumptions based on how relatable they found the individuals representing organisations and likewise this too was acknowledged as a factor by the employers in this study. The significance of this should not be underplayed – this is not merely about insuring that you increase footfall at your stand nor is it a tokenistic gesture to appear more relevant in today's society. This runs much deeper into the recruitment process and beyond; placing my findings alongside those of Milman and Whitney when they declared that 'careers fairs also allow students to make assumptions about prospective employment organisations as a whole, based on their perception of the recruiter' (2014: 176). The recruiters at careers fairs have such a pivotal role to play in not only how that company is perceived on the day but also as it creates the foundation of the relationship that any potential recruit may have going forward. These recruiters still have to be good at the job of recruiting but they also represent so much more than that whilst at the careers fair. As articulated by Sikes et al, 'It is very important that organisations produce effective recruiters since they have such a strong influence on job candidates' perceptions of a company. Early campus contact with students is a vital time when recruiters have the

opportunity to play a critical part in how applicants react to the company at a later date' (2010: 120). Throughout my investigation, it was evident in my findings that many of the students looked favourably upon certain personal characteristics in those on the stands, such as being knowledgeable and enthusiastic; incidentally, the same characteristics that previous studies have shown employers look for in students at careers fairs (Roehling and Cavanaugh, 2000). However, beyond these two characteristics, several of the students in this study, such as Ryan and Iqra, described wanting to see themselves reflected back from the stands, or at least people close enough to themselves to make them feel that this was a company worthy of further interaction. It may be that this becomes a more peripheral consideration when things are more challenging in the graduate labour market than now; after all, graduate employment levels (as measured in league tables) are at a modern day high (Destination of Leavers of Higher Education 2016/17, HESA). Nevertheless, these findings build upon those of Roehling and Cavanaugh, who stressed 'the effectiveness of including women and minorities in the recruiting team' (2000: 2). I would go further and argue that as well as improving the student experience at careers fairs by having a more relatable complement of staff on the stand, there is also a sound business case for doing so, and this too is apparent in the findings from my employer subjects.

Analysis of the data indicates a recognition that more diverse representation and greater relatability at careers fairs is needed; however, as Sarah (Emp-03) contends, for most this has yet to manifest itself fully at the events themselves. There remains a disconnect between the often stated strategic objectives of companies, in relation to diversifying their workforce, and the ability to visually represent this at a careers fair – except superficially in stand design and literature content. This presents an opportunity to leverage more potential from these events as there is scope for both recruiters and universities to make relatively

small changes in line with these findings. To consider careers fairs as an engagement piece rather than a corporate activity, would frame these events in the same way they are viewed by the students themselves i.e. primarily for fact-finding, career-thinking and awareness-raising purposes. If employers realigned their perception of careers fairs from one focused on a part of the recruitment process to one based on establishing relationships with potential future talent, then the data suggests they will find a very receptive student body to work with. This would particularly be the case, if they were able to provide an insight into their company that reflected the composition, the values and the aspirations of that same student body. Inequality in communities, education and the workplace are huge societal issues; yet this does not negate the imperative on all of us to challenge and breakdown inequalities where we can and where possible. Although the analysis of the data in this study does not suggest that careers fairs currently disrupt inequalities, it certainly does demonstrate that they have the potential to do so.

Reflections on practice

The process of undertaking this research and, in particular, consideration of the findings, has provided the opportunity to reflect on professional practice; both my own and the wider sector approach to careers fairs. If one accepts that employers are able to make changes to their approach to careers fairs in order to promote more meaningful engagement and a more fulfilling experience; therefore it is crucial to also consider what changes can be made by universities themselves.

As discussed previously, the remit and responsibility for delivering careers fairs at UK universities is almost exclusively that of the careers service. Furthermore, it is also the case

the careers fairs as we see today, have been formed and shaped by decisions made by careers service leadership. The power to alter and develop these events to address some of the challenges that stem from the findings of this study lies within the gift of this leadership too. There is an opportunity to make relatively minor changes to the format in order to better support fairer access to the graduate labour market and access to the career pathways on offer. Universities need to regard the careers fair as the culmination of a career planning exercise, rather than an isolated event. This way, preparation and expectations can be managed effectively and any anxieties can be mitigated. To consider space and configuration in a way that incentivises natural conversation and interaction, and removes barriers – real and perceived – should facilitate better engagement. University careers services need to work more closely with employers to help them make good decisions about careers fairs. For too long this has revolved around car parking and other logistical arrangements; instead, there needs to be greater insight offered by the careers service to ensure an employer extract maximum benefit from such events. Above all else, employers have a responsibility to themselves and the students to consider how best they present themselves at careers fairs; not least, in how relatable those staffing their stands are to those students attending.

Concerning my own practice, I will certainly spend more time discussing expectations with employers hoping to attend; not least to gauge a better understanding of their motivations but to also offer advice on how to extract maximum value from their commitment to attend. On a practical level, I think the booking form and prior discussions should elicit thoughts on some of the themes raised in this research, particularly around representation and relatability. I would also like the careers service to play more of a gatekeeper role, ensuring priority for those opportunity providers who can commit to more multifaceted and

meaningful engagement with students; rather than just data capture or the chance to grandstand their brand. There is also a duty placed upon careers services to support and prepare employers more effectively. Which students will be attending the event at what stage, and, if possible, what level of preparation have the students undertaken beforehand? Should a careers service provide an insight into these, this would enable recruiters to make the most of the discussions that take place and pre-inform many of those conversations. As far as the format of the event is concerned, I am certainly interested in ways in which we can remove artificial barriers to interaction, such as desks, as well as anticipating the flow of student traffic. This, to me, is key to incentivising engagement as this research clearly shows that instinctively, students conform to a particular flow through the space; therefore, to leave this aspect to chance would be a real missed opportunity. For students, careers services do need to consider a more nuanced approach to access. This is not simply a matter of crowd control, but more a question of maximising the numbers of attendees who find the space, and the overall experience, fulfilling. I would also like to conduct a review of pre-preparation work that is undertaken with students. Based on this research, I think it is plausible to move away from the traditional CV preparation exercises and move to pre-event support that focusses more on boosting confidence; increasing familiarity with what a careers fair looks like; establishing rapport; verbal articulation of skills; and how to follow up with employers after the event. Once all protagonists involved see careers fairs for what they truly are – relationship building opportunities – rather than what they have traditionally purported to be – a recruitment exercise – then everyone can recalibrate expectations in a way that produces greater fulfilment from the experience. It is here that universities and recruiters need to collectively seize the initiative and do more with process and practice to unleash the full potential of careers fairs.

Limitations of the study

As the study was an in-depth qualitative investigation, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small scale of the research did enable me to engage in some detailed exploration with a relatively small number of participants; however, it did mean that I had to be cautious making any generalisations. Basit (2010) argued that despite this caution, qualitative research is still fit for purpose and the findings have a transferability aspect to them - even if any such assertions lack complete surety and instead offer only possibility – and are ‘replicable and transferable to other similar contexts’ (2010: 16). The use of an interpretative approach in my research offers a perspective on generalisability which Smith and Osborn (2003) introduced in terms of theoretical instead of empirical generalisability, further described by Noon (2018) as the reader drawing upon ‘links between the findings, the extant literature, and their own personal and professional experiences (and) through the gradual accumulation of similar studies, more general claims can be made’ (2018: 81).

Another challenge was to reconcile the underlying tension that may exist in the data between the need to search for commonality and similarity, and the individual idiographic authenticity of a particular case. This challenge was not a threat to the research, nor did it negate my choice of approach; it was however something I did need to be aware of throughout the analysis and coding phase of the research. I mitigated the potential impact of this by ensuring each theme was represented by a majority of their peer participants. By establishing these higher order themes, it still enabled the uniqueness of the individual cases to flourish within the study as they represented individual points within the wider spectrum of a particular overarching concept. There is always the potential for what Noon

described as an 'uncomfortable dualism' (2018: 81), but this can be overcome, as it was in this research.

Other aspects to consider in this section include not having the luxury in terms of time and access to delve more deeply into the background and prior experiences of my interview subjects. This was a conscious decision based on practical reasons, and ultimately did not detract in any way from my ability to fulfil my research aims; not least as I was able to gain some insight into background from each, as can be seen in the data. However, an even greater awareness of the lived experiences of participants prior to my interviewing them, might have enriched this aspect more and added some greater context as to why they thought and engaged in the way they did.

Finally, an alternative approach to this investigation could have been attempted if the timescale for data collection had allowed for a longitudinal case study approach. In this scenario, a small sample of students could be tracked prior to a careers fair, through the event itself, and for a period after to determine to what extent the fair had influenced their subsequent actions and thinking. This could extend through any recruitment process and into the early career phase, and possibly beyond. The benefit of this would be that the same individuals would be under investigation throughout; however the practical constraints would make such a longitudinal approach difficult to achieve and my research would have been at the mercy of whether or not those same students would commit to continuing to be involved at regular intervals over a number of years. On balance, that was too big a risk to take for this doctoral level piece of research, but could be considered by others, as there would be definite value in such an approach.

Strengths of the study

The decision to situate this investigation within an interpretative paradigm was justified given the objectives established in the research aims and the new knowledge sought in answering the research questions. Furthermore, thematic analysis as a methodology and approach to frame this study was appropriate given my objective was to determine how a variety of stakeholders view and experience careers fairs, and more specifically, their subjective interpretation of these views and experiences. As Shaw contends, a qualitative approach is the right fit for research that aims to illuminate the 'uniqueness of a person's experiences, how experiences are made meaningful and how these meanings manifest themselves within the context of the person both as an individual and in their many cultural roles' (2001: 48). The data, and the subsequent analysis of that data, vindicated the use of thematic analysis and a strength of this study has been to extract and then interpret how the participants make sense of their thoughts and experiences in a way that is individual to them. Through the analysis process, I was able to develop themes and make connections; however, this was never at the expense of the personalised narrative that remained fundamental to the analysis. As Noon rightly contends, this commitment is one that 'is compelled with affording privilege to the voice of the participants' (2018: 80), and I feel I have done justice to that throughout this study.

Likewise, the choice of semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool brought a genuine depth and richness to the data. The use of interviews provided a channel for participants' to express their individual thoughts and perceptions on what they were being asked, with a fluidity and freedom that remain unbounded and flexible throughout the interview. The questions provided a core framework and enabled comparison and the

development of themes across cases at the analysis and coding stages. However, this core framework did not restrict or inhibit, as participants were able to take the interview into unexpected areas, allowing data to drive the process in conjunction with, and complimentary to, my theoretical framework.

Value was brought to this study by the decision to utilise Careership theory. This enabled an investigation that was interested in capturing the holistic and not just the specific. In other words, I was able to look at both the participants' and their interpretation of careers fairs, as well as the fields where this sense making was developing. This allowed for an approach that was able to focus on the personal narrative and the hermeneutic aspect at the core of the research; but was also able to embrace those structural and positional factors that are key to understanding the complexity of an individual's career construction.

Finally, the sample offered enough variety and representation to develop a significant amount of depth from the data and made the overall analysis both plausible and insightful. The willingness of all the participants to impart their perspectives on this topic in such a thoughtful and considered way meant that the data itself represents one of the strongest elements of this study. The potential riches offered up in their answers and their willingness to speculate and reflect in equal measure has been a particularly pleasing aspect of this process for me, and for that, I will be eternally grateful.

Recommendations for further research

Existing research on careers fairs is relatively scant and, as discussed in previous chapters, tends to focus on quantitative studies often designed to simply gauge reach and satisfaction

levels. Even with the addition of this piece of work, there are still many opportunities for further investigation and I have highlighted the following as suggestions for these:

- A qualitative study where the careers fair space itself, rather than the individual, forms the unit of analysis;
- A longitudinal case study approach – as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Would allow for long-term tracking of a number of students as they progress through a careers fair and into the early career stage;
- A larger scale mixed-method study to attempt to produce data that has greater potential for generalisability, possibly leading to sector-wide recommendations;
- An investigation into the experience of SMEs and careers fairs as, although they are currently not the main type of employer attending careers fairs - as they are still dominated by the high volume 'milk round' type recruiter – SMEs are increasingly present and some universities now put on specific careers fairs for them;
- A comparative study looking at both the central all-encompassing university careers fair as well as the sector-specific specialist fairs that are now also a feature of this type of activity on campus;
- There is also a strong rationale for investigating the careers fair as an indicator of employee 'success' within the recruitment process and early career progression within a company;
- Finally, there is potential to reconsider careers fair activity within the context of the wide range of employability enhancing experiences and career decision-making support offered to students at university.

Interview questions – students PRE

1. How did you find out about this particular careers fair?
2. Why have you decided to attend this careers fair?
3. How do you feel a careers fair could help/inform your career ...
 - a. awareness
 - b. decision-making
 - c. progression
4. What preparation are you doing
 - a. and why? (Describe, explain & evaluate)
5. What do you see as being the role of the careers service with regards to these fairs?
6. What do you feel employers/recruiters aim to get out of these events?
7. How do you feel the employers view the students/graduates at such fairs?
8. As the careers fair is in one huge hall, how do you think you will approach the space and make sure you get the most from it?
 - a. Do you feel confident about entering and using the space?
9. What do you imagine you will be doing on the day?
 - a. Do you think you will actually be doing that?
10. What sort of conversations do you think you will be having with employers?
11. What in particular do you think you will get from the event...
 - a. on the day
 - b. in the weeks/months after it
 - c. in the longer term
12. In addition to attending this event, what else are you doing to support career...
 - a. awareness
 - b. decision-making
 - c. progression
13. How important are careers fairs for students and graduates?
14. From what you know of careers fairs so far, would you change anything or do anything different? Either about the events or your approach to them?

Interview questions – Employers

1. What do you see as being the overall purpose of careers fairs?
2. What do you see as being the particular role of a recruiter at a careers fair?
 - a. What do you aim to get from the events?
3. What's the process of preparing for a careers fair?
4. What criteria do you use for selecting which Fairs to attend and why?
5. Why do you think students/graduates attend?
 - a. How do you think they prepare?
 - b. What else could they do?
6. Why do you think universities hold them?
 - a. How do you think careers services prepare?
 - b. How well do you feel they prepare the students?
7. What sort of conversations take place?
8. Do you feel careers fairs fulfil the expectations of the various participants?
 - a. Students/graduates
 - b. Employers / recruiters
 - c. Careers services / universities
9. What would make a successful careers fair for you?
 - a. on the day
 - b. in the weeks/months after it
 - c. in the longer term
10. What else do you think students can/should be doing? (Either additional to careers fairs or as follow-up).
11. What other graduate recruitment activities do you (and your organisation) do aside from careers fairs?
12. Do you feel careers fairs give all students the same opportunity to engage with employers?
 - a. Does it 'level the playing field'?
13. How do you feel careers fairs have evolved over the years?
14. What might employers do differently re careers fairs? Would you change anything or do anything different? Either about the events themselves or your approach to them?

Interview questions – Careers staff

1. What do you see as being the overall purpose of careers fairs?
2. What do you see as being the particular role of careers services re careers fairs?
3. What's the process of putting these events together?
 - a. Institution or sector/faculty specific
 - b. Timescale
 - c. People involved
 - d. Venue and size
 - e. Promotion/marketing etc
4. Why do you think students/graduates attend?
 - a. How do you think they prepare?
5. Why do you think employers attend?
 - a. How do you think they prepare?
6. What sort of conversations do you imagine take place?
7. Do you feel careers fairs fulfil the expectations of stakeholders?
 - a. Students/graduates
 - b. Employers
 - c. Careers services / universities
8. What in particular do you think students/graduates will get from the event?
 - a. on the day
 - b. in the weeks/months after it
 - c. in the longer term
9. What else do you think students can/should be doing? (Either additional to careers fairs or as follow-up).
10. How do you feel careers fairs have evolved over the years?
11. How do you as a careers service judge if a fair has been a success or otherwise?
12. What might careers services do differently re careers fairs? Would you change anything or do anything different? Either about the events themselves or your approach to them?

Interview questions – students POST

1. How did you find out about the careers fair you attended?
2. Why did you decided to attend?
3. In what ways did you hope the careers fair would help/inform your career...?
 - a. awareness
 - b. decision-making
 - c. progression
4. What preparation did you do?
 - a. and why? (Describe, explain & evaluate)
5. What do you see as being the role of the careers service with regards to these fairs?
6. What do you feel employers/recruiters get out of these events?
 - a. How do you feel the employers viewed the students/graduates at such fairs?
7. As the careers fair is in one huge hall, how did you approach the space and make sure you get the most from it?
 - a. Did you feel confident about entering and using the space?
8. Talk me through what you did on the day?
9. What sort of conversations did you have with employers?
 - a. How did the conversation start?
 - b. What would you have liked to have heard from an employer?
10. What in particular do you feel you got from the event?
 - a. on the day
 - b. in the weeks/months after it
11. In addition to attending this event, what else are you doing to support career
 - a. decision-making and progression
 - b. What will you do next/now?
12. How important are careers fairs for students and graduates?
13. From what you now know of careers fairs, would you change anything or do anything different? Either about the events or your approach to them?

Careers Fair research project – Information Sheet (Interviews)

Title – *Expectation, interaction and transition: a study of university careers fairs*

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

This research aims to find out about the expectations and perceptions of people attending careers fairs; how people interact with each other; how they use the space; and how it helps them progress. The findings aim to develop a better understanding of how people use careers fairs, so future attendees might benefit from this research. You will not be identified. Data will contribute to a doctoral thesis.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

It will take the form of a one-to-one conversation, known as a research interview. There are a number of prompt questions about aspects of careers fairs but the discussion can expand beyond these. It will take place in an interview room; last approx. 45 minutes; and be recorded on a digital audio device.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been invited along as you are either intending to attend a careers fair or recently attended one; as a student/graduate or a recruiter or as a careers fair organiser.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Yes. All participants will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified in any reports or publications. Non-anonymised data in the form of signed consent forms and audio recordings are collected and retained as part of the research process, but only by the researcher.

HOW WILL INFORMATION BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be securely retained in the researcher's possession until after my degree has been conferred. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. You are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

Results will contribute to a Doctor of Education (EdD) thesis, and may also be published in journal articles or discussed in conference presentations. You will not be identified in any of these.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Please contact the researcher, Stephen Boyd at s.boyd@hud.ac.uk or his doctoral supervisor, Prof. Kevin Orr at k.orr@hud.ac.uk

Thank you for your time and participation in this research

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY:

Expectation, interaction and transition: a study of university careers fairs

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

- | | YES | NO |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Participant's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Contact details: _____

Researcher's Name (Printed): _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Researcher's contact details:

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Careers Fair research project – Information Sheet (Observations)

Thank you for asking about the research being conducted at this Careers Fair. I hope that this information sheet answers your questions, but feel free to contact me using the details below if you have any further questions or don't understand anything.

1) Research purpose

This research aims to find out how people attending careers fairs interact with each other and use the space. The findings are intended to be used to develop a better understanding of how people use careers fairs, so in the long term future attendees might benefit from this research. There are no disadvantages to groups or individuals: you will not be identified, and your privacy will not be invaded. The data will contribute to a doctoral thesis.

2) How will data be collected?

Data will be collected via observations of various aspects of the careers fair. Observations will be conducted discreetly and without announcement. The observer will act as any other careers fair attendee would, so there will be no disruption to anyone during data collection.

3) What kind of data will be collected?

Observations will gather information on the nature of the use of the space and the discussions taking place. The researcher will make notes but conversations will not be recorded, and no photographs will be taken.

4) Do I have to take part?

No. If you do not wish to be included, please contact the researcher, Stephen Boyd at s.boyd@hud.ac.uk

5) Do I have to do anything?

Just be yourself! Carry on using the careers fair as you would normally. The research is not designed to judge how people experience the event, but to discover how it is used.

6) What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to make a complaint or raise concerns about anything you experience as a result of this research or the observations taking place, contact the researcher, Stephen Boyd at s.boyd@hud.ac.uk or his doctoral supervisor, Prof. Kevin Orr at k.orr@hud.ac.uk

7) Will I be identifiable in the research?

No. All participants are anonymised so you cannot be identified in any reports/publications.

8) What will happen to the results of the research?

The results will contribute to a final Doctor of Education (EdD) thesis, and may also be published in journal articles or discussed in conference presentations. You will not be identified in these publications.

Thank you for your time and participation in this research.

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